

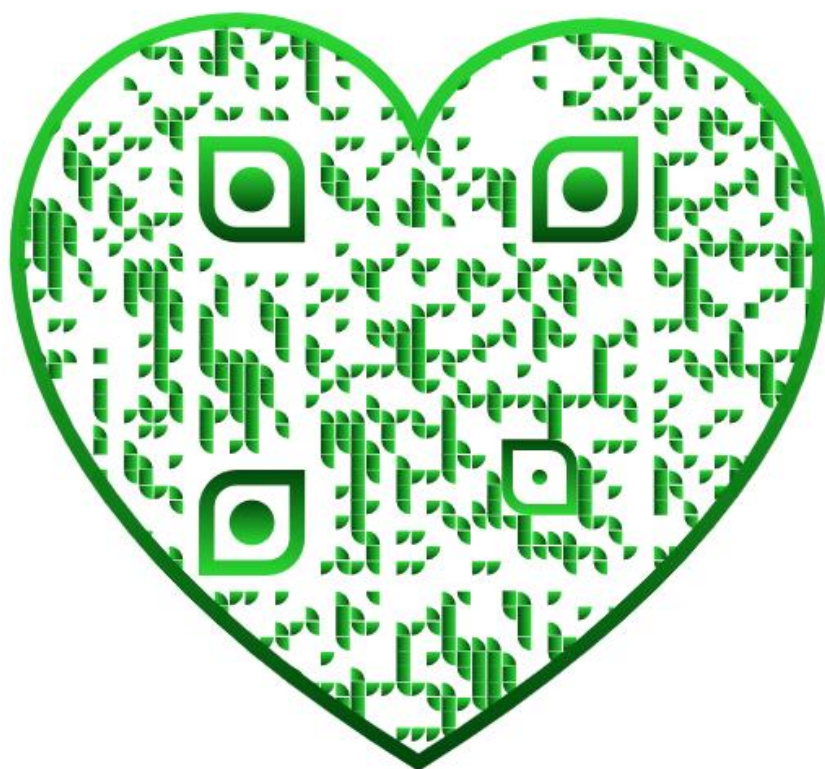


KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 12

The
Knight's
Lullaby

Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kurone
Mishima



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The
Knight's
Lullaby



"I'm Megumin.
As you can
see, I'm a
member of the
Crimson Magic
Clan and indeed
the greatest
magic-user
in all of Axel."

Megumin

"This is
Sylphina
Ford Dustiness,
my cousin.
And there's
a reason
she's here..."

"My name
is Sylphina.
It is my
esteemed
pleasure to
meet you
all."

Darkness

Sylphina

Aqua is a character from Final Fantasy IX, depicted here in a dynamic, anime-style illustration. She has long, flowing blue hair with a small blue bow at the top. Her eyes are wide and blue, and she has a determined, slightly open-mouthed expression. She is wearing a blue and white dress with a large blue bow at the waist and a blue ruffled collar. Her hands are raised in front of her, with fingers spread. The background is a light green field of small white dots. There are three blue and white striped speech bubbles around her, each containing a single blue teardrop. The text is written in a stylized, blue, outlined font.

“First I’m
gonna report
this to the lady
at the Guild.
Then I’ll let the
Axis Church
know, and
then it’s
over to...”

 Aqua 

“All right,
I’m a pervert!
I admit it! And
I’m going to
keep you up
all night!”



“Will you
become more
than friends
and less than
lovers with me
or not?”





“This man
has shown me
that I have
to be willing
and able to
associate with
all types, and I
would like
to think I’ve
acquired some
statesmanship.”

“It’s not
my pride as
a member of
the nobility
I must protect
but the
defenseless
members
of my
community.”

KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD 12



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Illustrations/Kurone Mishima
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KONOSUBA:
GOD'S BLESSING
ON THIS
WONDERFUL WORLD!
The Knight's Lullaby ●

12

NATSUME AKATSUKI

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KURONE MISHIMA


NEW YORK

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NATSUME AKATSUKI

Translation by Kevin Steinbach
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KISHI NO LULLABY

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Characters

Aqua

Job Arch-priest

An untamable goddess of water. Specialty: party tricks.

Kazuma Satou

Job Adventurer

Our NEET protagonist. His Luck is his only decent trait.

Darkness

Job Crusader

A tanky knight with a major masochistic streak. Daughter of an influential noble house.

Megumin

Job Arch-wizard

Genius of the Crimson Magic Clan. Not interested in anything except explosion magic.

Chomusuke

Emperor Zel

Vanir

Chris

A powerful demon of unknown age. Helps out in Wiz's shop.

Leader of the Silver-Haired Thief Brigade. Darkness's dear friend.

Prologue

A little girl who looked an awful lot like Darkness stood right in the center of the Adventurers Guild, smiling innocently.

“Boy, she’s a dead ringer for you, li’l Lalatina!” one female adventurer exclaimed, holding up a mug and gesturing at Darkness. She was absolutely taken by the girl’s adorable appearance. “C’mon—tell us the truth. Who’s the father?”

“Arrrgh, these damnable drunks! Kazuma, don’t leave me to fend for myself! Do something about them! I guess Darkness was pretty embarrassed, because she’d been flushed red for quite a while before she finally turned to me for help. So how did I help her, you ask?

“I am! I’m the father!” I confidently pointed a thumb at myself, and Darkness nearly pounced on me in the same breath.

“I’ll kill you for that, you jerk! Don’t make this any worse than it already is!”

The young girl giggled when she saw me and Darkness going at it. She was surrounded by a circle of grizzled adventurers and was smiling so widely that if you happened to see the scene in passing, you would feel compelled to alert the local authorities.

“Hey, Kazuma, I think it’s about time we decided who was VIP this time,” Aqua said, clearly in good spirits.

“You mean MVP. Which, I can confidently assure you, was myself.”

Megumin, smiling wisely, broke in. “Oh, can you? I believe I, with my robust display of Crimson Magic Clan secret techniques, have earned MVP this time.”

“All you did was mix the ingredients together. The bartender here at the Guild could have done a better job.” Megumin puffed out her cheeks angrily at that, so I added, “Hey, if it bothers you that much, how about we ask the girl of the hour? See who she thinks did the best work. Although I think we all know the answer to that one. I’m talking about me, of course!” Pointing at myself once again, I turned to the guest of honor, aka the reason we were having the party at all: the girl grinning in Darkness’s arms. “Who do you think was number one, munchkin?” I asked.

At that, the girl looked up at Darkness, and...

Chapter 1

Relief for This III Illegitimate Child!

1

Aqua looked as if she had been given the most important mission in the world.

“Ohhh man, I gotta tell everybody! I gotta tell the entire Guild...!”

“Wait, Aqua, listen to me!”

Darkness had a daughter.

“First I’m gonna report this to the lady at the Guild. Then I’ll let the Axis Church know, and then it’s over to the old guy at the vegetable stand, the old guy at the butcher shop, the old lady who lives next door...!”

“Aqua, don’t jump to conclusions! Take a good look at this kid first!” Darkness said, grabbing Aqua before she could rush out the door. As for me, I just stared blankly at the kid who had inadvertently caused all the hubbub.

“...Mama?” I whispered, and the kid flinched. She looked a lot like Darkness did when she felt uncomfortably like she must have done something wrong because we were all staring at her. The girl was almost the same age as Megumin’s little sister, Komekko, who had been at our house until recently. Maybe a little smaller, though.

“W-w-well, I guess it’s practically a noble’s duty to have children early!” Megumin said, trying to keep her composure in the face of this revelation. “And aren’t you lucky that you gave her more than just your hair or eye color. She’s the spitting image of her mother...! At least she’s guaranteed to be a beauty in the future!”

“Megumin, I can explain...! Please hear what I have to say!”

Let’s rewind.

Not too long ago, we and Axel's other adventurers had cleaned up every last unresolved quest in town. We'd managed to meet Komekko's expectations of us (grossly inflated, thanks to Megumin's bragging) and were finally able to get back to our peaceful daily lives. At least, that's what I'd thought.

But then...

"Another fetish? This one looks like bad news..."

"Th-th-that's *not* what this is!"

Darkness continued to deny it despite the undeniable fact that this kid looked exactly like her. She didn't know when to give up.

"...Eh, makes sense," I said. "I mean, with your sexual appetite, there's no way you could still be a virgin at your age! Damn, you're easy. Who was it, the milkman? The *pool boy*?"

"I'll kill you, you jerk! A daughter of the nobility would never give herself away so easily!"

Says the woman who nearly crossed the final frontier with me more than once!

...But anyway, far be it for me to blame the sins of the mother on the daughter. I crouched in front of the confused girl and smiled reassuringly. "What's your name, little lady?"

"Oh! Don't answer that, Sylphina! Just let me do the talking...!"

Despite Darkness's frenzied attempt to keep her from talking, the girl looked around uneasily, twiddled her fingers a bit, and finally whispered, "Sylphina Ford Dustiness."

"Sounds like your daughter, all right!" I shook Darkness violently.

"No, she isn't! She's my little cousin! So of course she has the same surname as I do!" Darkness was on the verge of tears...

"You can relax, Sylphina. These are my adventuring companions. Come now, say hello..."

Once things had calmed down a bit, we decided to give Darkness a fair hearing, accompanied by some green tea Megumin had made. The little girl, Sylphina, was seated in the middle of the couch; at Darkness's urging, she stood up as tall as she could. "My name is Sylphina. Mama... I mean, Lady Lalatina is my cousin. It is my esteemed pleasure to meet you all." Then she took a handful of her skirt and performed a perfect curtsy.

She seemed awfully collected and mature for such a young age—a product of noble upbringing, I guess.

"Well, nice to meet you, too. I'm Kazuma Satou. I'm your mama's adventuring buddy. We live in this town together. Feel free to call me Big Bro or Papa, whichever you like."

"You can't ask her to call you 'Papa' when her father is still alive!"

Megumin and I, sitting across from the Dustiness girls, held a

whispered conference.

“Kazuma, Kazuma, what do you make of this? She looks just like a tiny, waifish version of Darkness.”

“Yeah, the hair and eyes are the same color, and I admit she’s got similar features, but she has this super-high-class aura about her. I would expect any daughter of Darkness’s to be a little more rough-and-tumble, y’know?”

“Excuse me, you two, I can hear you! And I told you, she’s my cousin! The only reason Sylphina calls me Mama is because I’ve taken care of her since she was a little girl...!”

That was when Sylphina looked at us all and giggled.

Megumin cleared her throat in an attempt to collect herself. “So Sylphina, is it? I’m Megumin. As you can see, I’m a member of the Crimson Magic Clan and indeed the greatest magic-user in all of Axel.”

“Lady Megumin...” Sylphina’s eyes widened. I guess even Megumin knew not to hit a kid with the full force of a Crimson Magic intro, because for once, she introduced herself like a normal person. Sylphina looked intrigued, probably because of the “Crimson Magic” part. She seemed to be trying to decide whether or not Megumin was kidding when Darkness put a hand gently on her head.

“Let me introduce her properly. This is Sylphina Ford Dustiness, my cousin. And there’s a reason she’s here...”

According to Darkness, Sylphina had lost her mother when she was very young. Darkness had taken Sylphina under her wing, leading the little girl to think of her almost like her own mother. Just so there’s no confusion, Darkness’s mother was the older sister of Sylphina’s mother. The maternal line in their family typically possessed powerful magical abilities and magic resistance but frail bodies, and Sylphina was no exception. She got sick often. Darkness was a bit unusual; she’d inherited her father’s powerful physique and her mother’s potent magic resistance—the best of both worlds. A Dustiness hybrid, if you will.

“‘Hybrid’...?” Sylphina asked.

“Th-that’s enough out of you, Kazuma! Are you trying to pick a fight with me? Keep your mouth shut and let me finish!”

With the Demon King’s army getting more active these days, the delicate little girl had been moved from one place to another in hopes of keeping her safe, but the constant shuffling put even more strain on her. So Darkness had suggested she come to the safest possible place: the starter town of Axel. And then Darkness’s dad had let slip that we had this mansion here, and Sylphina had come over to play.

“...Huh. Hey, that’s a pretty good story.”

“Yes, a most natural-sounding cover.”

“It’s not a cover! Do the math! How old do you think I was when I allegedly had this kid?!”

Darkness got more and more agitated...until Sylphina suddenly burst into a fit of giggles. When she realized we were all looking at her, she quickly looked down at the ground. “I-I’m sorry. I’ve never seen Mama...I mean, Lady Lalatina having so much fun...”

“I am *not* having fun! Listen to me, Sylphina—this is one man you should stay away from. He’ll corrupt you just like he corrupted Lady Iris.” Darkness stood in front of Sylphina as if to protect her from me.

“Sylphina, sweetheart. Your mama tries to act all proud and protective, but she and Big Bro have been in the bath together, and she’s even snuck into my room at night...”

“Block your ears, Sylphina! Megumin, say something to him!” Darkness exclaimed, clapping her hands over Sylphina’s ears and turning desperately to Megumin.

“I don’t think he said anything that wasn’t true.”

“M-Megumin!”

At that moment, Sylphina, who had been watching our banter happily, was suddenly overtaken by a coughing fit.

“Sylphina, did you walk all the way here from our house? You know you’re not supposed to push yourself like that. I’ll let Father know you’re here, and you can stay the night. You can sit on the sofa and rest for a while.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry, Ma—Lady Lalatina.” She could hardly get the name out through her coughing.

Darkness smiled gently at her. “It’s all right—you can call me Mama. But only in front of these people. With everyone else, you should use my name.”

“All right, Mama, I will!” Sylphina said. She still seemed to be in pain, but her smile had returned.

What a nice story...

Megumin and I shared a warm and fuzzy glance, but then Darkness perked up in realization. “I have an idea. If Sylphina’s feeling too sick, perhaps we could have Aqua cast healing magic on her...” But then she stopped and looked around. “...? Hey, Kazuma, where’d Aqua go? I *thought* she was being unusually quiet.”

She was just noticing this now? I pointed to the front door. “She went that way. She actually left well before you got around to explaining anything.”

“Aw, Mama’s gone,” Sylphina murmured as she watched Darkness go racing out of the house. Somehow, the way she was curled up forlornly on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket, like a kid whose mother had abandoned her, made me feel really bad for her.

“What’s wrong with her, leaving this sweet little kid all by herself...?” I muttered.

“Sylphina—that was your name, right? I’m sure Darkness will be back before long. You can play with us until she comes home.” Megumin smiled: What with her little sister and all, she knew how to handle a kid.

“Okay!” A smile crossed Sylphina’s pale face, though it looked as if it might drift away at any moment...

“Honey, I’m home!” Megumin said as she opened the front door.

“Welcome back, my dear. How was town?” Sylphina, still swaddled in a blanket on the sofa, smiled.

What were we doing, you ask? Playing house, of course.

“Well, it was quite nice. I ran into a herd of twenty or so dragons wandering around, so I took care of them. It was hardly enough to get me warmed up.”

Megumin was playing the daddy while Sylphina was the mommy. Sylphina turned to me where I was sitting next to her. “Did you hear that, Kazuma? When you grow up, you can be a big, strong adventurer just like Daddy.”

That’s right: I was their son.

Apparently, I was a hero-to-be, with a super-awesome adventurer dad. I thought it would be more conventional for Megumin to play the mom and me to be the dad...

“I’m not gonna be an adventurer; I’m gonna be a merchant who makes his money leading people around by the nose. I don’t wanna do anything dangerous like adventuring!”

“Huh?” I guess that wasn’t part of the script, because Sylphina looked very surprised. “N-now, Kazuma, that sort of talk won’t do! You have the blood of a legendary hero in your veins, remember? As your mother, I can’t let you talk such nonsense when so many people are suffering under the Demon King! Say something to him, dear!” She turned to Megumin, nonplussed.

Wow, I was the descendant of a legendary hero?

“Well now, don’t worry yourself, my dear Sylphina. As dreams go,

at least it's a very realistic one. No parent wants to see their child put themselves in danger, so even if he turns out to be a great fighter, if our little boy can find his own happiness, I think we can be satisfied with that."

Geez, where was that kind of sensible talk from her the rest of the time? Sylphina nodded, although she still didn't look very sure about it. "Th-that's true enough... Very well, Kazuma. Become the best merchant you can be, then use your profits to help support other great heroes."

She seemed to have awfully mature ideas for such a young girl... I guess we could thank her noble upbringing for that. I wasn't raised by any nobles, though, so I wouldn't know.

"I'm gonna use my cash and my connections to dupe some softheaded noblewoman into marrying me so I can have status and power. Then I can have people wait on me hand and foot, allowing me to lead the most dissolute life imaginable."

"Dear, do you hear him? Our son is turning into a monster!"

"You mustn't get so worked up, Sylphina; this boy has always been like that... Still, Kazuma, she is right that it will not do to speak of duping noblewomen. Any noblewoman who was to get involved with you would no doubt run herself ragged worrying about your commoner status. The difference between you two would simply be too great. So when you're ready to find a bride, let me urge you to look for someone who may not necessarily be wealthy but knows how to get by, someone intelligent and open-minded."

Why was she lecturing me? And why did her lecture sound sort of...weird?

"You heard him, Kazuma! And Father knows best." Sylphina reached up to pat me on the head. The image of me being chided by a little girl was too much for Megumin; she turned away, but I could see her shoulders shaking. I guess she couldn't contain her laughter.

"Okay, but I wanna sleep with Daddy tonight. He can tell me adventure stories until I fall asleep."

"Hrk?" Megumin clearly hadn't been expecting this counterattack, but Sylphina clapped as if to say she thought this was an excellent plan. "Yes, that sounds like a wonderful idea. Dear, you can sleep with Kazuma tonight. Teach him what it means to be a real adventurer. I want to sleep with Mama...I mean, Lady Lalatina anyway." Sylphina looked very pleased with this arrangement. I guess she'd been hoping for an excuse to stay with Darkness tonight. She pulled the blankets up to her chin, grinning, and I felt my conviction that I *wasn't* a lolicon erode slightly.

No, this must be what they call *paternal instinct*, right? Nothing criminal about that.

Megumin must have felt much the same thing, because all of a sudden, she gave Sylphina a pat on the head. The girl looked up at her, surprised, and Megumin whispered:

“Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to have a daughter.”

Then, as if she suddenly realized what she’d said, she waved a hand frantically and said, “I didn’t mean that how it sounded! I just mean, it wouldn’t be so bad to have an heir for when my own inevitable physical destruction arrives...!” She started spouting the most ridiculous crap, as if to make up for the remarkably out-of-character thing she’d said.



“Hey, if you want kids, I’d be happy to help out with that anytime,” I said.

“Why, you! I can’t believe you can say such things in front of this poor, innocent child!”

3

That night...

“I hear you played with Kazuma and Megumin today, Sylphina. Did you have fun? What did you play?” Darkness, safely back with Aqua, was sticking her fork in a juicy piece of frog steak.

“We played house together.” Sylphina seemed to be having some trouble with the steak—it was Axel’s trademark dish, though maybe she wasn’t used to it yet—but this brought a smile to her face. She and Darkness looked less like a mother and daughter and more like sisters.

“And you...what are you doing?” I asked.

I was talking to Aqua, who was sitting formally on the floor because we had ordered her to sit and think about what she’d done. As if she’d been waiting for me to ask, she exploded. “Kazuma, listen to me! Darkness, that big meanie, got super upset when all I did was spread some gossip at the Adventurers Guild, you know? I guess I didn’t look bothered enough from the punishment I took when she grabbed me—I mean, I could Heal it away no problem, you know?—because she threatened to use her family’s influence to stop me from ever buying alcohol around here again. And all I did was tell people what I’d seen with my own eyes! Isn’t that the worst thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Imagine how *I* felt, what with everyone exclaiming ‘Congratulations!’ the moment I entered the Guild! I could hardly take it, with all the drunken revelry and jealous receptionists! Not to mention the questions about who the father is...”

Sylphina, listening to the conversation, looked bashfully at the table. “I’m very sorry, Mama. This is all my fault... I was just so happy to see you again after so long...”

“N-no, Sylphina, don’t worry about it! I like children, and having you here doesn’t bother me! It was the teasing about who the father might be...” For some reason, she glanced at me when she said that.

“The number one guess was Kazuma, and the second most popular possibility was a certain bearlike governor whom no one has seen in a while. The dark horse was...oh yeah, some golden-haired punk!” Aqua

offered.

"I know I'm not one to talk," I said, "but it sure seems like all the rumors around you involve some pretty shady guys."

"Pipe down! You really aren't one to talk!"

After dinner, we all sat in a circle around Sylphina and told her stories of our adventures. Aqua even got out her precious game console and let Sylphina play with it. It was peaceful, at least for a while...

I was gaming on the console, which I'd wrenched away from Aqua, when there was a knock at the door to my room.

"Kazuma, are you awake? May I come in?" It was Megumin, although her voice sounded oddly high-pitched.

"Yeah, I'm awake, I guess, but I don't think I want you to come in. Every time you show up at this time of night, you end up leading me on and then laughing at me. I'm sick of getting myself all worked up just for you to turn around and walk out the door."

"Please do not speak of a person as if she was merely a blackhearted temptress! I don't believe I have ever led you on and then laughed at you!"

You must have a pretty dark heart yourself, then.

Not even pausing my game, I glanced at Megumin, who was peeking in, the door cracked open. "What do you want anyway? Can't fall asleep on your own, so you decided to come curl up with me?" I looked down at my game and went back to playing.

"That's right. I thought maybe we could sleep together tonight."

She said it like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I froze with shock; in front of my eyes, the game character Aqua had so lovingly developed was murdered by a monster.

4

"Oh, no, I'm not being taken in by any more of your little invitations. Unlike Aqua, I'm capable of learning from experience. Okay, so I'm a virgin with high hopes, but that doesn't mean you can simply wrap me around your little finger."

That's right, I had a thing going with the town's beloved succubus. Just yesterday, I'd spent a sleepless night after this girl had asked me if I wanted to be something more than friends and less than lovers, but hey, fool me twice, right? Even I knew better than to let her dupe me over and over.

“I do not know what you are saying. Was it not you, Kazuma, who suggested we sleep together tonight? Or have you forgotten what you said while we were playing house with Sylphina?”

I dropped the game machine.

I *had* said that. Yes, yes, I had!

...No, wait, it's too soon to be getting excited!

“M-my goodness, why are you so suspicious? You did not seem so upset about the other night yourself, Kazuma, so why pout now?” Megumin sounded genuinely puzzled, but even as she spoke, she worked her way closer to me.

“I’m not pouting; I’m just angry that I get hung out to dry every single time like a character in some third-rate romantic comedy! A guy my age wants to get all he can get, okay? But you and Darkness both seem to love taunting the pure, unblemished virgin for some reason. Once a guy’s in the mood, once he’s *ready*, it’s awful hard on him to be left hanging.”

My counterattack put Megumin on the back foot. Sweating, she replied, “G-gosh, I only wanted to let you know about my affection and try to deepen our physical relationship. I didn’t realize it was hurting you. I—I apologize for that...”

“Well, now you know, so get out of here. It was your sick invitation that killed Aqua’s precious character. Now I’m gonna have to spend all night building another one back up to where she was, or she’s going to be a blubbering mess in the morning.”

“No, wait! There’s something important I wanted to talk to you about tonight, so please don’t chase me away! In fact, I am rather incensed that you take that game more seriously than you take me!”

I sat up in bed to meet Megumin’s attack. “Whatever, enough ‘let’s sleep together’ or ‘I want to join you’ or whatever else. It gets me all hot and bothered, but then I feel so pent up. It’s like torture for a guy. If the alternative is you dangling yourself in front of me until the last minute and then pulling yourself away, I’d rather sleep by myself.”

“...It seems I am at fault here for giving you the wrong idea. I had no idea you were so frustrated by it. In that case, forget my suggestion that we sleep together, but could we at least talk for a moment?”

.....

“Gee, that feels a bit like a wasted opportunity. Poor, lonely me...”

“You can be quite a headache yourself, Kazuma! Anyway, I am coming into your room!” Megumin barged in, closing the door behind her, and then helped herself to a spot on my bed. When she sat down, though, all that aggression vanished and she stared silently at the floor. It looked like she wanted to say something, but her face just got redder and redder...

“Come on—quit it! What’s with the blush? If you have something to say, then say it. Lately, everything you and Darkness have done has been so bad for my heart! That’s exactly the kind of thing that’s been getting me all...you know, like I was talking about!”

“P-patience, please; do not rush me! Conversation should begin with innocuous topics like the weather, should it not? Let us start with a calm, ordinary talk.” Megumin wasn’t getting any less red.

“I swear—I don’t know what your problem is! First you sneak into a guy’s room at night, and then you want to talk about the weather?”

I guess even Megumin knew she was being dumb, because her crimson eyes started to brim. “Uh, I...I’ve got it! Say, how did it go with Iris in the end? I know you became obsessed with Komekko eventually, but it has always bothered me that you would choose living in the castle over being with us.”

So she wants to start that again, huh?

I’d managed to avoid giving any details by claiming that the memory-erasing potion had left me without a clear idea of what had happened.

“It was just, you know... Iris, whom I adore as my little sister, was weeping, bawling her eyes out, really, and begging me not to leave. When a girl like that turns those big, moist eyes on you and says stuff like ‘I really love you, Big Brother’ and ‘You’re my one and only’ and ‘I would die without you,’ well, it’s hard to ignore.”

“I have never met such a softy in my life. But did she really say you’re her one and only and that she would die without you?”

Okay, so maybe I was sort of filling in the missing details in my memory with my imagination, but that was pretty much how it had gone as far as I was concerned.

...Hold on.

“Arrrrrrgh, dammiiiiittt!”

I jumped out of bed: Something had suddenly occurred to me.

“Wh-what’s going on? You can’t make that kind of noise at this time of night! What if someone comes running and finds us here?!”

“No, it’s Iris! I forgot about Iris! She said something to me shortly before I was forced to drink that potion. ‘If you ever remember me, write me a letter,’ she said! ‘I’ll wait as long as I have to!’”

This was bad. I had to get that letter out! There was no telling whether Iris might do something extreme in the face of the neglectful tragedy she’d experienced. I hastily grabbed a piece of paper and turned to my desk to start writing, but—

“Hold it.” Megumin, still sitting on my bed, had grabbed a handful of my shirt.

“What? I don’t have time to chat with you about dumb stuff; I have something important to do. Stay out of my way.”

“A girl of the right age is sitting in your room, yet even as you look upon her, you attempt to write a letter to another girl. I must say, it’s rather incredible! In fact...” Megumin gathered her resolve and locked eyes with me. “Do you remember what I said yesterday?” Her crimson eyes seemed even more crimson than usual, and her face was extremely red.

“The thing about being more than friends and less than lovers?” How could I forget? Thanks to that, I’d been losing sleep. My voice was a little scratchier than I would’ve liked, but Megumin just nodded.

“That’s right, more than friends and less than lovers. I came here tonight for your answer.”

...*Huh?*

“Wait, you thought that was some sort of come-on last night? The way you ran off before I could say anything, I thought it was a sick new game you’d made up where you leave me hanging.”

“Just how terrible a person am I in your mind?! I would not thoughtlessly play with a man’s heart!”

If she was so sure about that, then I would have appreciated if she’d stop rubbing up against me and saying provocative stuff with no follow-through.

“So... What is your answer?” Megumin said, her eyes shining as she leaned closer to me...!

“Hey, too close, too close! Your face is way too close to mine, and anyway, what’s your plan? If I say I’ll go out with you, does that make us lovers? What does it even mean to be more than friends and less than lovers?! Should we go ahead and be lovers, then?! What’s the big idea, leaving the most important part all mysterious?!”

“Erm, well, if we were lovers, it would be hard to decide how we should act in front of everyone else. We don’t need to jump right to the kissy-kissy stage. We can just take it calmly, one step at a time...” Suddenly embarrassed by what she was saying, Megumin fidgeted shyly.

“What’s with the maidenly reaction? You’re makin’ me sweat—stop it!”

“I am a maiden! Think of my age! What else could I be?! How exactly do you see me anyway?!”

I guess we had started out a little too blunt here, but having her act like this all of a sudden totally threw me off.

“...Hang on. Is it just me, or are you starting to feel a bit jealous? Don’t tell me you’re thinking Iris is your rival. Come on—be rational. Even I’m not scummy enough to be *that* much of a cradle robber.”

“I don’t know how you can say that, considering that you were more than ready to abandon us and stay at the castle. Yes, I’m jealous. I can tell you this now that things are a little calmer: When you said

you weren't coming home, I almost cried. How many times must I tell you not to make us worry so much about you?" I guess Megumin's emotions were really running hot, because her eyes shone brighter than ever. I'd seen that glimmering red before, but never had it been so clear. "And I understand perfectly well, let me tell you, that I'm not the most useful wizard in the world. So when a very serious-minded young girl appears, one who's exceptionally strong and whose character even overlaps with mine a bit, you'd better believe...!"

In an excess of emotion, Megumin grabbed my chest. *Argh! This isn't love; it's assault!*

"Okay, okay, I get it—my bad! I'm really sorry about that, I am! I apologize!"

Despite my abject apology, the color of Megumin's eyes didn't dim. "So what are you going to do? Will you become more than friends and less than lovers with me or not?" she said, completely serious and also noticeably angry. This was crazy. It was the least sexy confession I'd ever heard. In fact, the way she said it, it sounded more like a threat, what with her leaning toward me like that...

Before I could answer, there was something I wanted to be clear about. "Let's talk ground rules: What's inbounds when we're 'more than friends and less than lovers'? C'mon—there's gotta be something. You know what I'm talking about."

Megumin, red up to her ears, looked at the ground. "Yes. Yes, I believe I do. Now that you mention it, we've never done any such thing together, have we? Very well, let us begin. The time being what it is, we can start first thing tomorrow morning!"

"The time being what it is"?

"Tomorrow morning"?

"Are you kidding? Now's the perfect time, isn't it?"

"...One moment, Kazuma. Do you suspect we may be thinking of different things? What exactly are you asking about? I think we had a similar confusion before, so just to be sure, let's say what we're each thinking on the count of three. One, two..."

"Making babies."

"A date."

Oh yeah. I guess we'd never been on a proper date.

"Excuse me?" Megumin said pointedly, but I clapped my hands as if it all made perfect sense now.

"You're right—we've never been on a proper date, have we?" I responded. "Guess we can't skip right to the lovey-dovey stuff."

"'Making babies,' indeed! Very well. It's not quite what Mother said yesterday, but if you are prepared to take responsibility, then

fine! In fact, I suppose it would be more in character for us to end up getting married in such an informal manner..." She let out a sigh, as if the truth was now sinking in for her.

"...Geez, when you talk about shotgun weddings, it all seems really real all of a sudden."

"Hold on a moment. At a certain inn not so long ago, when we were about to cross that line together, I believe you said you cared about me as well!"

Uh... Huh. I guess I did. Maybe I'd been so revved up with Megumin in my arms that I had *felt* like I would take responsibility or whatever.

"That was then; this is now," I said. "You cost me a lot of sleep last night, so after we finished playing house with Sylphina, I took a little walk. Got a special deal on an afternoon nap."

"And what does your nap have to do with what we're talking about?! I cannot understand you!"

See, whenever guys get a chance to "cool themselves off," they're rewarded with otherworldly mental clarity.

My name is Kazuma Satou, and I know better than to take on major responsibility just because I got a little horny or emotional for a few minutes.

"Remind me again how old you are, Megumin. Barely fifteen, right? I don't think it's good for you to be so eager about kids and marriage and stuff. You should start with some nice, purehearted dating. Now that I'm thinking about it, how could we let ourselves get swept into making babies and having shotgun weddings when we haven't even been on a date? It wouldn't be any good for the kid."

"I can't believe you're saying that when it was you who brought up the whole idea!" Megumin exclaimed.

"No, listen to me. I've had a good, sober think about this. We hardly even know each other, right? I mean, you're always talking about how you're an adult and whatever, but all this 'I love you! Let's have kids!' business is the most childish stuff imaginable."

"Again, *you* started this! You act as if you didn't feel it, Kazuma! You're always a little strange, but today you're stranger than ever...!"

But when she saw how levelheaded I was in spite of the circumstances, it seemed like Megumin started to understand. Even as I watched, her face got colder, and her eyes, they... Ah, yes: They resembled the eyes of a person staring at an insect. It was the same look she gave me whenever she saw me staring at Darkness as she wandered around the house in her underwear.

"Wh-what am I going to do with this man...? I never expected you to be quite so cold simply because your sex drive had vanished, nor did I think you were quite such a lost cause... After all we've done

together, all we've felt together, it turns out it was just because of your lust! And then when you're satisfied, it's only logic and reason...!"

"Whoa, slow down there. All we've done is get in the tub together and cuddle up beneath the sheets. I'd hardly say that's a lot. If you're going to tear down my reputation like that, I at least want to do something deserving of that punishment!"

"Very well, if you insist on this ridiculous argument, then I am ready."

Oops, those were "looking at garbage" eyes.

At last, Megumin heaved a sigh. "I suppose I always knew you were this way. The whole fact that I can't seem to hate you for it just goes to show what an easy woman I must be..." Even so, her gaze was still sharp, as if the garbage was especially stinky. "Ahem... I suppose this is no atmosphere for a confession of love, but we still have to answer the question 'What do we do now?'" Megumin's shoulders slumped, heavy with exhaustion, and she looked straight at me. She was completely still, as if waiting for me to say something. But heck, I didn't know what to do any more than she did.

I'd known Megumin and the others for quite a while now, but back when we first met, I had never imagined I might be in this kind of relationship with anyone, and I didn't even know how I really felt myself. I'd never even been on a first date with a girl, let alone done any more than that, so I didn't know what it meant to fall in love or what it felt like...

.....

Huh?

I tried my hand at imagining the future, and... Well, marriage and kids still seemed like a lot to deal with, but all of a sudden, going out with Megumin didn't seem like such a bad thing at all. In fact, even at this moment, after I'd, uh, *relaxed*, a date with Megumin sounded like a pretty good time. It wouldn't have to be anything special. Even hanging out together, like, *Hey, Megumin, we've got a few minutes to kill, so why don't you grab some lunches and let's go to the lake? Maybe we can make some waves with your Explosion or something.*

...Huh?

What was this?

What was this?

"H-hey, Megumin, this is serious! I think I might actually be in love with you!"

"You are the worst! You are absolutely the worst! I can't think of anyone worse than you! You *think* you *might*?! Is that supposed to be a

confession?! Don't you have anything better to say than that?!"

She was really expecting too much from a hopeless virgin like me. Feeling oddly sweaty, I turned to her with a confused expression. Megumin sighed. "You really do choke when it counts, don't you...? I know I said I appreciated that about you, but sometimes it's pretty annoying, too..." She looked like she was giving up on something but also like she was faintly amused. I let out a relieved breath to see her that way but was immediately met with a glare.

S-sorry!

"...So what do we do now? I mean... Wh-what's the nature of our...our relationship...?" She seemed a little anxious. And a little red in the cheeks.

Ummm...

"G-geez, I don't know. To be perfectly honest, I've never been in this scenario before. When a girl suddenly asks me if I want to go out with her, I don't know what to do. So I don't think I could really object to your idea about being more than friends and less than lovers. It would make me happy, really. You've got some strange points, but hey, at least you've got the looks... So, uh, I mean, I guess maybe we could go with...that sort of relationship...?"

"Y-yes, fine by me...", Megumin said. "Let us do that, then, for the time being... Besides, this way, the others won't get upset..." She was acting downright shy. Maybe it was my comment about her appearance, but anyway, she seemed to be feeling a bit relieved. I realized I was starting to get a little embarrassed myself. Man, look at us, acting like a brand-new couple.

This was bad, bad news. It was all fresh and bittersweet and heart-pounding! Wait, what would we do about Darkness and Aqua in all this? Maybe we'd better tell them. But how would that affect our relationships with them?

Less than lovers...

Did that mean we could do *some* things that lovers did, though? And just what kinds of things were those...?

While I was busy mentally trying to answer these questions, Megumin said, "All right, let us keep this a secret from Darkness and Aqua until we graduate to being proper lovers... And, ahem, as such, we will of course refrain from doing anything dirty."

"Huh?"



Chapter 2

Despair for These Nouveaux Riches!

1

“Bring him back! Bring back my precious Snyder! I developed him myself, you stupid NEET!”

“I got another character up to exactly the same level, so just deal with it. What’s dead is dead! I’m sure Snyder is enjoying himself in some other world right now. He probably took out the Demon King and got to bask in the limelight.”

It was the next day.

We were in the living room, our collective place of relaxation, and as I had expected, Aqua was sobbing about her missing game character. In other words, a normal morning for our household.

“Really...? You really think Snyder is off in another world, having fun?”

“Oh, I’m sure of it. I’ll bet he’s got the beautiful girls, the harem, the whole nine yards. So don’t cry for him.”

Megumin finally got up while I was busy reassuring Aqua. “Good morning, you two. You’re up rather early today, aren’t you?”

“I guess so. Darkness’s kid and I were playing with Emperor Zel earlier. Her nervousness around him was so adorable! I guess she’s never fed a dragon before.”

More likely, she was nervous because she knew a chick like that would drop dead if you made one wrong move with it.

“Ah yes, Sylphina. I haven’t seen her around. Did she go somewhere?”

“She and Darkness went out for the day already. I guess Darkness figures that if Sylphina’s going to be living here, she ought to meet some kids her own age.” It just went to show that Darkness really did care about her cousin; she looked after her like she really was her

mom.

That seemed to make Megumin happy, because she smiled. “I see. Well, I hope the child will soon adapt to life in this town.”

Aqua, sprawled on the couch, put in: “Hey, Megumin, I know you get up early all the time, but what’s with Kazuma today?” As usual, this world-class dunce chose the worst possible time to develop an insightful streak. I could hardly tell her I’d jumped out of bed today, looking forward to my very first official date with Megumin. And I definitely couldn’t say that with Megumin herself standing right there. “In fact, you seem to be up a little earlier than usual, too, Megumin...”

Megumin flinched. “Wh-what makes you say that? I am frequently up around this time. Clearly, you and Kazuma are up earlier than usual yourselves, so you only *think* I am up very early, and besides, it is a beautiful day today, perfect for an explosion, so of course I would be eager to get up and blow up!” She was starting to ramble, and Aqua gave her a blank stare.

...Huh? Could it be that Megumin is actually a little bit excited for our date, too?

That’s right, a date.

My very first date with a girl in my entire life.

Sure, I’d toured Elroad with Darkness that one time, and I took Megumin out to fire off explosions pretty much constantly, but there was no, you know, *mood* when we did that. None of those counted.

As Megumin and I stole little glances at each other, Aqua, usually the most resolutely oblivious member of the household, smirked. “Ahaaa... I see what’s going on with you two.” Of all the times for her to develop some woman’s intuition!

“A-and what is that, Aqua?”

“Yeah, stop grinning like that. Or I promise you’re gonna be crying two seconds from now!”

Aqua wasn’t deterred by Megumin’s and my threats, though; she put a hand to her mouth and said, “There was leftover frog steak last night, and you both got up early hoping to get your hands on it! Well, too bad for you. The early bird gets the frog steak, and I ate every last bite!”

Okay, so maybe Aqua was just being her usual self.

...Hang on—wait a second.

“Screw you! I was saving that! I got up in the middle of the night to make sandwiches for today! Why do you always have to do the most obnoxious things?!”

“What’s eaten is eaten, so boo-hoo! You don’t have to get so upset. I’ll help you make your dumb sandwiches.”

Aqua must have felt genuinely bad when she heard I’d been up late making those sandwiches, because she actually apologized...

“Hang on. Where were you gonna take those sandwiches? If you two are going to go have fun somewhere, I wanna come!”

.....

2

“*Exploosion!!*”

Explosion magic slammed into a lake not far from Axel. Brutal destructive power rent the air over the water, sending shock waves rippling along the surface. Some of the water vaporized, spreading out in a fine mist that shimmered in a rainbow of colors as it caught the light.

“I give today’s explosion ninety-five points! The destructive power is a given, but using the environment like that, producing that spray, gives it an extra layer, and that rainbow was downright beautiful. The only thing it lacked was practicality; otherwise, it could have gained a few more points.”

“Unfortunately, with no monsters around, practicality is rather out of the question. This is my highest score in a while, though. Today promises to be a good day!”

I went over to the very satisfied Megumin and used Drain Touch to transfer the minimum amount of MP she needed to be able to move. That was when I noticed something. “Hold on. That shock wave nailed some fish! Perfect, let’s bring them in and grill them up. We don’t have as many frog-steak sandwiches as I planned on, but a little cookout would be a nice second best. Great work, Megumin!”

“Does that mean...?” She looked at me expectantly as she sat up.

“Today’s explosion gets ninety-eight points!”

“Thank you! Thank you very much! Thank you so much!” Tears formed at the corners of her eyes, and even I could hardly hold back a snuffle as I nodded at her in acknowledgment.

Meanwhile, Aqua was watching us...

“Excuse me, but can I ask you something? Are your conversations *always* this stupid when I’m not around?”

She was being awfully rude for someone stuffing her face with a fresh, handmade sandwich.

“Pipe down, Aqua—this isn’t stupid. For an *explosier* (an Explosion sommelier) like me, this is an important and meaningful ritual.”

“He is right, Aqua. These days I find my mood, my health, and everything about a day can be dictated by this score. Explosions are no game!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t want to

know, but there's one thing I do know. This is a subject I'd better leave alone." Gee, I guess Aqua had started to pick up some basic learning abilities.

But still...

"Hey, Megumin, does this actually count as a date?" I whispered to her.

"I'm not sure. I don't really know what a date entails myself... But when you go to a scenic location with the person you like and share lunch together, couldn't that be considered a date...?"

Hmm, so this was a date. Somehow it didn't feel that different from what we always did. I guess having Aqua there sort of spoiled the mood. We'd invited her to come along on the assumption that suddenly being alone together would leave us both feeling pretty awkward, but eventually, we were going to have to—!



“Mm, that’s a good sandwich. Once we grill up those fish, how about a midday nap? Boy, talk about picnic weather! Next time, we’ll have to ask Darkness and Sylphina to come along!”

Aqua said all this as she climbed out of the lake with an armful of fish and started gathering branches to make a fire.

...Ahhh, I had it wrong all along.

This wasn’t a date. It was a family picnic.

3

We were back in town after returning from our outing.

Just at the gate to Axel, the guy guarding the town entrance called out to us. “Hey, you’re all adventurers, aren’t you? There was an emergency summons earlier. You should head to the Guild.”

And so we did.

Standing in the middle of town, the Adventurers Guild was the area’s anti-monster nerve center. It was a veritable fortress for the local adventurers, a formidable stronghold that always had our collective backs.

We headed over to the Guild like the guy at the gate said but stopped before we got inside.

“All right, everyone, please line up here. This is an emergency. This is an emergency summons. I’m very sorry for the trouble, but we thank you for your support.”

The receptionist was shuffling the gathered adventurers into a line outside. It looked to me like they had all grabbed their equipment when they’d heard about the urgent quest and come running. But what was the point of lining us up out here if there was an emergency?

Not only that, but it looked like some Guild staff members and people I assumed were local functionaries were busy building some kind of barricade around the adventurers...

Hang on a sec.

It almost seemed like they were trying to cut off our escape route so we couldn’t get away. There was some murmuring among the adventurers. None of us had a good feeling about this.

...*What’s going on here?*

“Hey, something’s not right. My sixth sense is telling me it’s time

to run. I think we'd better get outta here while we still can."

"You're a sharp one, Kazuma. I've got a bad feeling about this, too. Maybe it's a goddess's intuition." Hearing Aqua's opinion wasn't reassuring.

Someone came up to us. It was Darkness, who had vanished early in the morning with Sylphina. She crossed her arms and said, "Don't worry, you two. Nothing criminal is happening, and nobody's going to do anything awful to any of you. Just calm down."

Okay, did that mean...?

"Do you know something about this urgent quest?" She might have had her arms crossed, but otherwise all that was protecting her was a black shirt and a tight skirt. Civilian clothes. This when everyone else here was armored to the hilt.

Darkness didn't answer me. Instead, an anxious whisper started to spread through the crowd, alongside a looming disquiet. Us adventurers, though...we knew. We knew the Adventurers Guild was a national organization created for our benefit. It existed solely to support us. We did the jobs the Guild gave us and did them well, and in return, they helped us when we were in trouble. It was a cooperative relationship, not an adversarial one—it couldn't be. They had no reason to be hostile toward us, and we had no reason to mistrust them.

That was the claim of the whispers, which gradually helped ease the tension. Until the woman standing before us in front of the Guild said, "Everyone, we have something urgent to ask of you. An emergency quest, if you will. Today marks exactly one month from the end of the fiscal year. You know what that means... Taxes are due today.

"Now, some members of this Guild have yet to pay the taxes they owe."

I saw a few adventurers make troubled faces. "Wh-what the hell is this? Tell me what the hell this is! Hey, Aqua, what the—?"

"C-c-c-calm down, Kazuma! Just try to stay calm! We have to keep our heads! Look, that lady's going to say something!"

The wall of Guild staff members and local officials closed in around a few adventurers who tried to flee at the announcement. Others raged or simply wept. Reactions varied, but there was one thing everyone there did: wail like they were at a funeral.

Some bureaucratic type at a safe distance announced, "Ahem, we have not, of course, er, asked this of you in the past. Naturally. Adventurers tend to be, ahem, very poor. So to date, we've practiced...not precisely tax forgiveness, ahem, but a certain

compassion and have overlooked your tax burdens.” Even he didn’t sound very interested in what he was saying. “The Adventurers Guild is, of course, supported by taxes paid by all the townspeople, as are the rewards disbursed thereby. Despite the service it renders in eliminating monsters, in principle, the Guild is not subject to any special treatment, but compassion for your plight has previously moved us to forgive your collective tax burden. However, it is our, ahem, understanding that the members of the Guild have experienced a collective windfall this fiscal year... Some major bounties have been collected, I gather... To date, we’ve compassionately overlooked your tax burdens, so we certainly hope—nay, expect—that at least now that your purses are full, you’ll see your way to doing your civic duty.”

At that, the adventurers trying to run or resist simply fell silent. And I didn’t blame them: This was the first I was hearing of any of this. Right up until now, merely being an adventurer had always meant that things like taxes simply didn’t apply to you. Surely we could afford to pay the town back now that we had some cash in our pockets. I mean, we lived here, didn’t we? We owed this town as much as anyone.

Somewhere in the crowd, someone asked, “So *how much* do we owe in taxes anyway?”

The bureaucrat replied:

“Those who have made ten million eris or more will be taxed at a rate of one half their earnings to the fiscal year to date...”

The adventurers scattered in every direction.

4

“Aqua, what do we do?! Half our stuff? These people are nuts! They’re gonna take hundreds of millions off me!” I cried.

“I don’t have any money! I already spent it all! They can’t force you into bankruptcy to pay taxes! I swear I’m not going into debt again—no way! Let’s run, Kazuma! Let’s run far away! The tax system in this world is simple: Every year at the harvest, the first month of autumn, you have to pay. Your taxes are calculated based on your income to that point each year, and you have to pay it by the end of the month!”

“Well, at least they kept things simple! Dammit, wait. *Today* is the last day of the month! So we run, and then what? What happens if we don’t pay by the end of the day?!”

“You’re exempt. If you don’t pay by the end of the day—the end

of the tax office's business hours, no less—you're exempt from payment for the year!"

Wow, simple and generous, too.

"Wait, how's that work? Do people ever pay taxes under this system?"

"Don't be dumb!" Aqua snapped. "The nobles make the laws in this world, remember? So of course they would set things up to work best for them! For commoners with minimal incomes, it's more expensive to get out of town than to pay their taxes, so they always pay. But the rich people and the nobility take their autumn vacations right around now every year. After the end of the month, they come back."

Geez, that was underhanded. I mean, even a cultured nation like Japan has corruption and tax evasion and stuff, but the nobles in this world really knew how to raise the bar...!

"What a bunch of pigs! This sucks! Well, I can play that game, too!"

"H-hold on...! Not all nobles are nasty; some of us are good...!" Darkness said pleadingly. Hey, wasn't *she* going to run? I was about to ask why she was still here when she would surely have a huge tax burden when I noticed something in her hand.

The adventurers all knew it would be that much worse for them if they injured anyone while resisting, so instead of fighting, they were running around like chickens with their heads cut off. It really bugged me to see what Darkness was holding.

"Whatcha got there?"

"Oh, this? They work like this," she said and then clapped one of the steel circles, connected by a chain, she was holding over her own right wrist. They were what we would've called handcuffs in Japan. Frankly, I was surprised I was seeing them only now, knowing what a perv she was.

"What exactly are you doing?" I asked, annoyed, but Darkness summarily ignored me.

Whatever, I didn't have time to be dealing with Darkness's fetishes today. If I understood correctly, if I could lie low through the end of the day, I would be legally tax-free. I was just about to suggest to Aqua and Megumin that we get out of there when...

"Yes, Miss Megumin, right? Hmm, let's see here... Your income this year was negligible, so you're exempt. Thank you for your cooperation!"

...Megumin was already done with the whole thing.

When she noticed me looking at her, the (literally) poor girl gave

me a big smile. *Grrrr!* That left Aqua, Darkness, and me...

Ka-click.

.....

“Now what are you doing?” I said to Darkness. The freak must have finally cracked, because all of a sudden I discovered the companion to the cuff on her right wrist was snapped around my left. I didn’t have time for this idiocy; this was an emergency. I swear, this muscle-brain could be worse than Aqua sometimes.

Darkness gave me a friendly smile and, just as casually as if she was suggesting we go for a walk, said, “It’s a citizen’s duty to pay his taxes. So pay up. You’re the adventurer with the biggest income in the whole town.”

Oh yeah. She was on *their* side, wasn’t she?! Dammit!

“H-hey, lemme go! Dammit...! You guys!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha, surely you can treat your friends better than that, Kazuma! C’mon, Aqua—you too!”

The air in front of the Guild Hall was thick with cries of protest. I saw other adventurers being led away as Darkness reached out and grabbed Aqua’s arm.

“Noooooooooo! Darkness, please look the other way! Kazuma! Kazuma, please! Do something—I’m begging you!” She slapped at Darkness’s hand, but the Crusader showed no sign of letting go.

“Gimme some buffs!” I shouted at Aqua. “Muscle power, speed—boost everything! Then maybe I can drag us outta here! Darkness, cuffs, and all! We should be able to handle her between the two of us!”

“Hrm...” At that, Darkness simply let Aqua go. “...Aqua, I’m willing to ignore what you owe. Get going. Tax collectors are already prowling the streets around here, but if you can avoid them, you’re welcome to do whatever seems best to you... But in exchange for my clemency, I want you not to buff this man.”

“Aw, you dirty, rotten—! Hey, Aqua, she’s trying to divide and conquer! Don’t listen to her! Hit me with that magic!”

“.....”

Aqua backed away silently. And then...



"I...I'm sorry, Kazuma. If I can leave even one person slower than me to keep them busy, my chances of escape are better... And besides, if you run away, then they'll turn to the second-most-in-debt adventurer in Axel...and I think that's me. Which would mean even more tax collectors chasing me..."

Seriously, why was it always moments like this when she suddenly developed a brain?

"All right, Aqua, how about this: If you give me that support magic, I'll teach you a way that's guaranteed to get you, at least, out of here safely. How about that?"

"...Do you really expect me to believe the guy who was ready to drop us all like hot potatoes and live in the royal castle just a few days ago?"

Dammit... When she's right, she's right.

"O-okay, I'll tell you what to do first. If it sounds good to you, give me the strength buff or the speed buff, doesn't matter which. Your choice!"

"Urgh... All right. What do I do?" Aqua leaned toward me so I could whisper in her ear. And then...

"Kazuma! If we both get out of this alive, let's meet up back at the mansion! I'll give you both buffs!" And she promptly put a couple of spells on me. Then she cast a couple on herself before weaving among the last of the struggling adventurers and making her way out into town.

"I don't know what you told her, but she sure seemed to think it would work," said Darkness, who, for some reason, had let the entire conversation go on uninterrupted. I had to wonder why she seemed to think none of this was a big deal.

"You're awfully relaxed about this. With that strength buff on me, you won't beat me through sheer strength. Now I can KO you with Drain Touch and haul you around like luggage."

Darkness wasn't impressed. "I'll believe it when I see it," she said, an incongruous smile on her face, and then she lifted her arms as if to say, *Pick me up if you can.*

I was about to do just that, but...

"U-um, Darkness, I-look at all these people... I'm a little nervous, grabbing you like this..."

"H-heh, you're not the only one...!"

Nonetheless, I managed to get my arms around her, but...

"You won't budge an inch!"

Darkness, practically triumphant, said, “Heh! I’ll have you know this plan has been in the works for a long time. The operation was supposed to take place at the beginning of the month, but then we were out of town so often. Right when I thought things were settling down, you said you wouldn’t come home. I was at the end of my rope.”

Geez, I guess I underestimated her. I always thought she was nothing more than a soft daughter of the nobility, but it turned out she could be steely when she wanted to.

“But here we are. We made it work on the very last day...! I knew from the start that you would try to run. And it’s my job to keep our most lucrative taxpayer from escaping. I’m talking about you, of course. To prevent you from getting away... Yes, for this very day, I’ve...!”

“‘For this very day’...! Y-you *deliberately* put on weight just for this?! After all that fretting about your abs, you went and gained—*waaargh?!’*”

Darkness smacked me before I could finish. “They’re weights! Have a look at this! I’ve put lots of weights under my clothes! Look! Look!!” She rolled up her shirt to reveal an extensive collection of small chunks of what resembled steel... Geez—! Had she walked all the way here like that?

Either way, this was bad! Really bad!

“D-dammit! Hey, receptionist, I thought you were supposed to be on our side!”

“I’m sorry; I’m a public servant myself! They said I had to do this, or I wouldn’t get my summer bonus! I’m really sorry!”

I could see other adventurers I knew being arrested. There were chairs lined up in front of the Guild, and people who had finished paying their taxes were slumped in them, exhausted and defeated. Megumin, meanwhile, was relaxing, sipping some tea one of the staff members had brought her.

“Grrr, why go to all this trouble anyway? All you need to do is hunt the fat cats and take stuff from them!” someone said.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t do that. Too many people deliberately booby-trap their houses with potions that explode when you touch them, left in a location where the tax collectors would be sure to stumble over them, after which *they* sue *us*, alleging that we damaged valuable assets...”

A few people went on arguing with the staff like that, but there were fewer and fewer of them. This was dangerous. I was at the back of the line, but they were going to get to me eventually...!

“...You look like you’re feeling completely invulnerable, Darkness. What kind of persuasion would work on you? I know you too well to

think you'd let me off if I tried to bribe you."

Darkness knitted her brow. "Don't patronize me, Kazuma. The Dustiness family bows to no one and takes part in nothing underhanded. Come quietly, and—"

"*Steal.*"

I ignored her and used my ability to take away one of her weights. I tossed it to the side.

"...Hey, Kazuma. You do remember that your Steal ability has a high chance of taking someone's underwear, yes? Do you really want to do that in front of all these people? Resistance is futile—just pay up."

"*Steal.*"

Whoops, that's a miss. I had Darkness's black tights in my hand, fresh off her legs.

As I stuffed them in my pocket, Darkness hissed, ".....A-are we really doing this?"

"Oh, we're doing this. I'll strip you until you're as light as a feather and then carry you off."

.....

"Ah, you're Kazuma Satou, our biggest debtor, right? Come right this—Huh?! He ran away! And with Lady Dustiness in tow?! She was supposed to be guarding him!"

I weaved through the crowd of officials, dragging Darkness all the while!

5

"Arrrgh, he got away... He completely had his way with me and ran off...! And here I had sworn to pry taxes out of this man, even if it cost me my life...!"

Darkness was stripping the weights from her body, looking like she might cry, as we stood beside the street I had run down. Admittedly, I was impressed that she had been able to run with all that extra weight, but...

"C'mon! Quit whining and let's go. How stupid are you, throwing the key to the handcuffs away in the mansion's front yard before you came to town? I'm heading straight for the outskirts."

"I know about your incredibly high Luck. I was afraid that if I had the key on me, you'd Steal it in one go and escape. Anyway, they'll be watching the gate now. You should give up. You were much more of a man when you were mired in debt than you are now that you're

rolling in cash.”

“Shut up! I didn’t ask for your opinion!”

I was sneaking down the road, still attached to Darkness by the chain between us. It was hard to be inconspicuous like this, though. At the very least, we had to stay off the main streets. Thanks to the whole urgent-quest pretext, most of the adventurers had come dressed in full battle gear. Anyone would know at a glance who and what they were. Dammit, the Guild and those bureaucrats had really thought this one through. Ugh, why did I ever come back to this stupid town? Though to be fair, I’d actually been *sent* back...!

Don’t let your guard down, White Suit! I’m coming for you, Little Sister...! Wait for me!

Oh, how I wished to see Iris’s face. Why did I have to be stuck running around an ungrateful town like this, and chained to this woman, no less...?

Whatever, I had to take advantage of the empty streets to buy myself some time. I wondered if Aqua had escaped safely. Megumin sure had looked like she was enjoying herself. And *this* moron...!

“Hoo...” Darkness crouched down, too tired to move.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be the iron lady with a zillion times as much stamina as I have. Don’t tell me you’re already getting tired! Stand up!”

“‘Iron lady,’ right... Poor Lalatina, poor pampered noblewoman, she’s tired and she can’t walk anymorrh?! ” I gave a violent pull on the chain, dragging Darkness to her feet before she could finish her mocking little pronouncement. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll stand. And I’ll run, too. So please give me another of those pulls... The way the cuff bites into my wrist is just so...”

“Y-you’re thinking about that *now*?” The sight of the red-faced, fidgety Darkness was almost enough to make me break down and pay my taxes then and there.

“I found him! He’s over there! Lady Dustiness is helping to slow him down! This is the Demon of Axel we’re dealing with! Call some backup! Do not let him escape!”

The voice was still distant, but that was already too close.

“Arrrgh, damn! Okay, here we go, Darkness! Don’t you dare slow me down! You try anything funny, and it’s Steal for you, you understand?!”

I truly believed I was threatening her.

“...K-Kazuma, when I think of you ripping everything off me out in public like this, I can’t help thinking maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after all... Maybe I’m already a lost cause...”

“You’ve been a lost cause since the day I met you!”

The Guild people were gaining on us...!

It was around sunset, I figured. The government offices would have to be closing soon. And here I was, sitting on a cold rock. Across from me, studiously silent, was Darkness, seated on a chair with a nice, soft cushion.

“You’re such a cheater...,” she whispered.

Well, I could live with that.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m glad you appreciate how smart I am.”

“You’re a cheater! A low-down dirty rat! Usually when you give up on everything else and run, you have something in mind...! Ugh, now every noble who hears about your little trick is going to do the same thing when they can’t run away!” Darkness exploded.

“Guess that’s just the way it works here... You’d better make some new laws or get some policemen who know how to play dirty. You figure it out.” I continued to hug my knees as I answered.

At the moment, Darkness and I were holed up in what seemed like the safest place in town. The place with the most authority: friend of the downtrodden, captor of criminals in the name of justice.

That’s right: We were at the police station.

“If there’s one thing that’s true in every country and every world, it’s that different branches of government never get along.”

“You cheater! You sneaky cheat! You’re the cheatingest cheat who ever cheated!”

I had dashed into the police station, the tax collectors hot on my tail, and used Steal on a lady officer standing there. I was promptly arrested on charges of theft and indecent behavior. (I won’t mention exactly what I stole.)

“Ugh, even in jail, you’re still stubborn... You know taxes pay the police’s salary, right? They were so happy to lend me those handcuffs! Why are they being so obstinate now...?! And you, you reported Aqua like you were the victim, and now you’re willing to commit a crime in order to get out of paying your taxes...!” I mostly ignored her bitter mumbling.

“Boy, am I lucky you were attached to me. Thanks to you, I bet we’ll get out of here as soon as tonight.”

“There’s no way I can believe you!”

The tax collectors had objected in vain when the cops tossed me in jail after my arrest. They’d had a muted conference after that but apparently hadn’t been able to come to terms about handing me over.

Maybe thanks to Darkness, or maybe just because this was my first time, the police had said they would release me after the interrogation. Well, it was after the interrogation, and now we were waiting for them to finish the paperwork. I would be home before the night was out.

Thanks to the fact that we were cuffed together, Darkness was stuck with me, but because she wasn't a criminal, they gave her a nice chair to sit on while she was in the cell with me. When the sun was well and truly set, Darkness and I heard a voice.

"All right, get out of here. You're free to go. There's even someone waiting for you. Sorry about all this, Lady Dustiness... This way, please."

6

"We're home... Huh, didn't Aqua manage to run away?" I asked as Darkness and I came through the door of the mansion to discover Aqua sobbing on the couch while Megumin tried to comfort her. And after I had specifically told her a special way to escape that only she could possibly use.

"Ah, welcome home, Kazuma. Well, it seems she very nearly made it to the deadline, but..." Megumin, giving Aqua reassuring pats on the head, was obviously troubled.

Between sniffles, Aqua managed, "Wa... Waaah...! Just like you said, Kazuma, I tried to make for the water purification place...! But before I gob dere, dey founb me...! And the only choice I hab was to hide in dis tiny irrigation pond...! Anb *den*...!"

My idea had been for her to sink herself down in the huge retention pond at the town's water processing facility and stay there until the night was out. As the goddess of water, she could breathe as comfortably down there as she could up here. And I figured nobody would go dredging the retention pond...

"I gather that once she was in that pond, some of the officials started using fire magic on it in an effort to boil her," Megumin said. "Happily, it seems the deadline passed before they managed it, and they had to give up. But it was a rather traumatic experience, and Aqua hasn't stopped crying..."

Wow, the bureaucrats around here sure were ruthless. I'd been sure it was a great plan, but maybe it had been a mistake on my part.

"Oh...? Have you still not managed to free yourselves from those handcuffs?" Megumin asked, looking at Darkness and me. Ah yes, the handcuffs the police had so generously lent Darkness. I had assumed being thrown in jail was the perfect solution, because they could set

us loose on our way home.

“But I guess every pair of cuffs has a different key, so no one can steal one key and go around releasing criminals,” Darkness mumbled. “And the key to these cuffs in particular...”

I picked up where she trailed off. “This idiot was afraid I would steal the key from her, so she threw it away. Just flung it somewhere on our property. No idea where, but it’s getting late and I can’t see in the dark well enough to find one tiny key, even with my boosted abilities. I’m gonna make her look for it tomorrow morning.” I gave Darkness a jab with my elbow; at least she had the decency to appear remorseful. I wanted her to understand that she’d done something stupid.

“...Oh-ho, so what you’re saying is that for tonight, the two of you will bathe together, use the toilet together, and even sleep together. What good friends you are.”

Megumin, that’s not...

That’s...not...

.....

““ ””

Darkness and I looked at each other. Neither of us said a word.

Chapter 3

Closure for These Feelings!

1

Eating utensils clattered.

As inept as she was the rest of the time, when we were having a meal, Darkness could act downright refined and eat without making a sound. She must have been feeling awfully nervous today or something, because uncharacteristically, the clattering was coming from her knife and fork.

We were all seated around the table.

“Kazuma, pass the soy sauce, please!”

“Yeah, sure...” It was right next to me, so I grabbed it with my free left hand and was just about to pass it to Aqua when...

“Oh...!” (That was Darkness exclaiming.)

...I remembered that my left hand was still attached to Darkness’s right hand. I had accidentally dragged her to one side when I tried to give Aqua the soy sauce.

“S-sorry about that...,” I said.

“N-no, it’s all right...,” Darkness answered meekly.

“Thank you!” Aqua chirped, apparently ignoring both of us. She was in such good spirits that you would never imagine that until a few minutes ago, she had been weeping about almost being boiled alive by some tax collectors. She seemed to have forgotten all about it as she scarfed down her dinner. She was so carefree that I started to feel a little jealous. If I’d been chained to her instead...

“...I-I’m all done...,” Darkness mumbled, blushing faintly and with more than half her meal still on her plate.

“Why are you both so nervous?” Megumin interjected. “Sleeping with each other after such a long acquaintance surely isn’t so intimidating. If you are that worried about being alone together, Aqua or I could join you, and we could have a little sleepover.”

““Y-yes, please...!”” Darkness and I answered in unison, to my surprise.

Darkness’s eyebrows twitched. “...Hey, it’s one thing for a woman like me to ask Megumin to sleep with us. But you’re a guy. Where do you get off saying she should join us? As a woman—even if not much of one—I’m a little uncomfortable with that.”

Ugh, what a headache.

“Listen, you know perfectly well this isn’t going to go anywhere sexy,” I said. “If I’m going to risk inviting all sorts of zany misunderstandings anyway, I might as well have Megumin sleep with us. You’re the resident muscle-brained character anyway. Who knows, maybe you’ll give me a big hug in your sleep and break me in half without even waking up.”

“D-don’t be dumb! In what universe does anyone crush someone in their sleep?!”

It would be better to have Megumin or Aqua there with us than to be up half the night worrying about my demise at the unconscious hands of Darkness. Anyway, we’d all camped out together, slept in the stables, and so on. Frankly, sleeping in the same room should have been no big deal at this point.

“Hoo-hoo. You know, I think this might be the first time we’ve all slept in the same room together since we moved in here!” Aqua said. “So as a special treat, before we go to bed, I’ll tell you one of my scariest scary stories!”

“N-no, you need not do any such thing, Aqua...,” Megumin said.

“Y-yeah, she’s right,” I agreed. “I don’t think we need any spooky stories, what with this being a former haunted house and everything.” I was remembering some business about a haunting back when we had first gotten this place.

But as for Darkness...

“Gosh, who ever heard of an adventurer who was scared of a little story? No wonder so many people have been complaining to our family recently about cowardly adventurers. Show a little backbone.” She sounded really annoyed.

...Geez...

“...Huh, I guess I do remember you saying something like that a while back. Wait, why have people been complaining to your family...? Oh yeah, you’re the acting governor right now, aren’t you?”

“You know as well as I do that once the adventurers around here get a little money, they completely stop taking any hunting quests,” Darkness said. “We finally managed to clean up all the leftover quests, but it’s not that easy to fix a lazy streak. There are even monsters starting to stake out territory right near town. At least that might help light a fire under people...”

“Hang on a minute. Are you saying Axel’s adventurers have all become NEETs? *Wait a sec...* That whole urgent summons today... The thing about paying all those taxes you’d looked the other way on...”

“You’re finally catching on,” Darkness said with a smirk. “Those adventurers might have kept the town safe in the past, but if all they’re going to do now is sit around, then there’s no need to give them any breaks when it comes to taxes, is there? Yes, part of the tax-collection scheme today was a ploy to get the adventurers up off their behinds. The Guild personnel were more than happy to go along with it. They’ll get more tax money, and adventurers who suddenly find their purses empty will come in to work. They’ll probably even take care of those monsters, the ones that are getting too close to town. But don’t you worry—all that tax money will go right back into benefiting the adventurers...”

“Damn youuuuu!” I jumped to my feet and gave a violent jerk on the handcuffs. Darkness, naturally, was dragged upward. “So what the hell?! You’re telling me I got chased to hell and back just because you wanted to get some rich loafers to do their jobs?!”

While it was true that the police had let me go without pressing charges due to it being my first offense, it turned out that the cause of my newly minted criminal history had been right beside me all along!

“What do you mean, ‘*just* because’?! Taxes and labor are a citizen’s duty! What’s wrong with telling someone who refuses to work that they need to at least pay their taxes? Our country doesn’t need NEETs! They’re nothing but trouble! They’re worth less than garbage!”

“So one of my party members completely rejects everything I ever was until I came here?!”

Darkness and I were about to come to blows when Megumin said tiredly, “...I don’t think any of us is worried about you two getting into a lewd situation at this point. Just go to bed for tonight. And try not to kill each other...”

2

With dinner out of the way, the next order of business was obviously...

That’s right, for a Japanese person like me, it had to be a bath.

“Oh, screw you! I’ll have you know that Japanese people *have* to take a bath every day or they die! I’m nothing like you nobles, who hate bathing and try to cover the stink with some perfume! So stay out of my way!”

“Screw *me*?! Screw *you*! We nobles know perfectly well that we

have to bathe every day! Where are all these nobles who you claim hate baths? I simply thought that with things being the way they are, it would be best to skip the tub and just rinse ourselves off with some warm water, that's all...!"

That was the gist of our argument.

"After all that running today—all that *sweating*—I damn well better get a bath! I might not even last the night otherwise. I'm not asking you to get in with me or whatever. You can sit there and wipe yourself off with a towel if you want while I have a nice, relaxing soak."

"But look, taking a bath means getting naked...! You want me half-naked, cleaning myself off, while you sit in the tub completely nude...?!"

While Darkness and I yammered at each other:

"My turn. I use my magic card of Swamp Magic. Aqua, your monsters can't move for this turn."

"...Urgh. I still can't do anything, then. I pass."

At the table, Aqua and Megumin were absorbed in some kind of card game. I guess they weren't even going to bother trying to stop us from fighting anymore.

"Personally, I don't care if you see me naked once or twice in my life, so it's fine by me. Some might even call it a privilege, so maybe you should enjoy it," I said.

"And you're saying I *do* care? Nobody's worried about your modesty. I'm afraid for myself, having to *look* at your naked body!"

"My turn. I use my magic card of Explosion Magic. The opponent dies."

"Waaaaahhhh! Megumin, I don't like the way you've been using those magic cards! I've lost three times in a row without ever being able to do anything!"

I ignored Aqua and Megumin, leaving them to their weird little game, and instead dragged Darkness—still muttering about this and that—toward the changing room.

I'd heated the water while Aqua and Megumin had been making dinner. I hurried to take off my...

"...Huh, how's this work? With these cuffs on, I can't take off my shirt... Maybe I'll just have to cut myself out. This thing was getting old anyway." I grabbed my dagger and sliced up the shirt I was wearing...

"I'm not sure how I feel about your complete willingness to get naked with me right next to you."

I guess Darkness had some kind of objection, but I ignored her as I reduced myself to wearing nothing but one handcuff and a towel.

Darkness, for her part, was holding her towel; she'd taken off only her shoes. I guess she planned to wipe down her body while I sat in the tub.

She followed, embarrassed, as I gleefully headed for the bath.

We sat back-to-back to rinse ourselves off before we (or I) got in the tub. Darkness still wouldn't take off her shirt or skirt; instead, she soaked the towel with warm water, then squeezed it uncomfortably under her shirt.

It didn't take me long to rinse off, and I headed straight for the tub. That meant, of course, that Darkness had no choice but to sit right near the edge.

"Whew... A good bath can take the edge off on even the toughest day. What a blessing..."

"...The way you don't hesitate to strip down right beside a noblewoman of a certain age... No, forget it, I'm not going to say anything else about whatever you decide to do." Darkness dipped her right hand, the one with the cuff around it, in the water, then sat down smack on the wet floor, sliding up against the edge of the tub. There was some quiet splashing from her hand in the tub. "...Hey," she said with a sigh, "do you think the other adventurers resent me now?"

That came outa nowhere.

"...? No idea. You think they even know it was your idea? Heck, they never had to pay taxes until today, right? So maybe they don't care that much. Then again, I guess I can be blasé about it, since I managed to escape without paying anything."

There was another sigh from Darkness, this one more resigned. "...I didn't want to do it, either, you know. Our nation's finances are in terrible shape. We're in such a rough spot that we even had to beg for financial aid from Elroad. Those taxes really will be returned to the adventurers several times over eventually... Honestly, if they'd done their jobs like they were supposed to, I wouldn't have had to resort to such tactics..."

Gee, that sucked. "You say labor is a citizen's duty, but if a guy was so loaded that he'd never have to work another day in his life, why would he? Especially when the job is something as dangerous as adventuring. My country griped about labor and taxes, too, but there were lots of people like me: people who belonged to the Advanced Class known as NEET. We should have the right to quit working if we choose to."

"I'm impressed your country still exists, if that's their attitude. That stuff... What did you call it? Manga? You said you have some form of amusement by that name in your land, yes? You said something about how if you could draw decent pictures, you would be

able to accrue a mountain of wealth creating manga and then live a good life... So suppose we have one of those manga artists. And suppose she makes a ton of money. She decides to live a life of luxury with the cash. Then she announces that she's not going to finish what she started. She's not going to draw any more manga. Who needs an ending anyway, right? ...Wouldn't that be a problem?"

...Erm, well... Yeah.

...A big problem.

There were a bunch of series I wanted to see more of (not going to name any names).

"Work entails responsibility," Darkness went on. "This is a town for beginners. It has all kinds of support systems in place to help new adventurers get on their feet and learn the ropes. The expectation is that those adventurers will then be able to protect the people and the nation if it comes down to it. The more experienced and veteran adventurers recognize their role and obligation as adventurers even if they make a bunch of money, but for some reason, the newbies in this town... I don't know why, but they've started to get some strange ideas lately."

...?

"Strange ideas?" I asked casually, stretching out in the tub.

"Yeah... There's this dumb motto that's been spreading through the ranks of the adventurers lately. It claims that 'the hardest worker is the biggest loser' or something."

"....."

I had a vague idea of who had started that motto.

"...Hey, why so quiet all of a sudden? Looks like you have some idea how it started. Hmm? Are you still upset? Hey, if you have something to say, then just say it."

"It... It's nothing, trust me..."

Nothing except what I'd been saying to the other adventurers for ages now.

3

When we emerged from the bath, we discovered a weepy Aqua clinging to Megumin.

"One more round! Please, just one final round to settle things!"

"I'm afraid not. The result is always the same. You simply can't beat me, Aqua. As we agreed, you must do any one thing I say, understand?"

Megumin was virtually undefeated when it came to brainy stuff like board games and card games. It was probably due to that famous

Crimson Magic Clan intelligence, but I wished she would use it for something constructive.

“Okay,” I said. “I know it’s early, but I think we should hit the sack. Early to bed, early to rise. Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and able to find that stupid key. I’m hoping we can get our hands on it before I have to use the bathroom in the morning.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right,” Darkness said, still clearly embarrassed. We’d each done our business earlier, and while Darkness was doing hers, she’d insisted I sing in an unusually loud voice in order to cover the sound. I seemed to remember having to do the same thing for Megumin back when this house had still been haunted.

I objected that if she was so desperate, Darkness should be the one to sing, but no, I ended up giving an a cappella concert. Feeling aggravated, I randomly stopped singing once or twice just to make life hard on her, and as payback, while I was taking my turn, she grabbed my shoulders from behind and shook me. That naturally led to another shoving match, but I’d had my fill of this idiotic situation. It was time to get some sleep and hopefully find that key before I had to use the bathroom again tomorrow.

“All right, we’re off to bed. Megumin, Aqua, you’re really not joining us?”

“The two of you can sleep together tonight. Based on what we’ve seen so far, I highly doubt there will be any ‘mistakes.’ In fact, I wish you would get along well enough that one could worry a little more about such lapses. You both need to be a bit more adult.” Megumin was clearly fed up with our constant fighting. Though because my mind was always in the gutter, I couldn’t help but hear the word *adult* and imagine something totally different.

Megumin seemed awfully indifferent about this for someone who was supposedly more than friends and less than lovers with me.

...A glance at Darkness made me think I wasn’t the only one with my brain in a dirty place. Her intense blush suggested she was imagining something disgusting, so I gave a yank of the handcuffs to snap her out of it and headed for my room.

For the record, the handcuffs made it impossible for me to put on a shirt. So I was still naked from the waist up. But it was nice and warm in my room, and with the covers pulled up to my chin, I wasn’t worried about catching a cold.

We would be sleeping in my bed, in my room. The cuffs were attached to my left wrist and Darkness’s right, so I would sleep on the right side of the bed.

I dove under the covers as soon as I could. “...Now, just because we’re in bed together and my sexy, sexy bod is within arm’s reach, don’t think that means you can get up to anything while I’m sleeping.”

“As if! Sexual harassment is *your* game; I think I’m the one who should be worried here.”

So she wanted to be difficult? Fine. I pointedly rolled over, turning my back to her. “Good night!”

“H-hey! What, you’re really going to sleep? And nothing else...?”

In response, I pulled the covers over my head.

4

I didn’t know how long I had been asleep when I discovered I had rolled over so I was facing Darkness. When I opened my eyes, there she was, inches away from me, her own eyes closed. I was practically cheek to cheek with her. I mean, she was very, very close.

Hang on...

“Just what are you trying to do?” I asked calmly.

“?!” That made her jump; then she lay perfectly still, eyes closed.

“.....Zzzzzzzzzzz...”

“Hey, don’t pretend to be asleep; I know you were just—”

That was when I felt something strange on the back of my neck. I touched it with my free hand, and...

It was oddly damp.

This could mean only one thing...!

“You...! You kissed me, didn’t you?! You kissed my neck while I was sleeping, and then you got your hands all over me, didn’t you?”

“I d-d-d-d-did not! I didn’t get that far! No, wait, that’s not what I meant! I swear this isn’t what it looks like!” And then Darkness was blushing again, tears brimming in her eyes as she shot upright.

“*What* isn’t what it looks like?” I said, still touching the damp spot on my neck. “My neck is wet, here! I know you can’t hold back your own lust, but to go after me while I’m sleeping! To violate my pure, virginal body...!”

Darkness raised her pointer finger in front of her mouth desperately. “N-not so loud! It’s not—! I swear, I didn’t do anything! It’s just, when I woke up, I realized I had shoved my face into your neck! I’d just drooled on it a bit...! I knew I should wipe it off, but when I saw the way you looked so defenseless, sleeping there handcuffed to me, I felt like I’d done the worst thing in the world... I felt so guilty...! And it only got worse and worse...!”

So she *had* been playing with me. I sat up, feeling around my body. “...Huh. My belt is still buckled and everything... I guess you really didn’t do anything to me...”

“Wh-why do you sound slightly disappointed...?” I didn’t know what had been getting “worse and worse” for Darkness, but she was blushing faintly and her breath was ragged.

“I always knew you were a horndog with a hot bod, but I never imagined you would actually attack me in my sleep. I’ll bet when you snuck me those drugs, you meant to go all the way back then. One of these days, I’m going to have to start calling you Perviness.”

“P-please don’t...! Ngh... Hrgh! H-having you shouting at me and calling me a perv when we’re like *this*...it’s making my heart race... Maybe I really am a lost cause...”

“Oh, believe me, I knew you were a lost cause from the day I met you.” I straightened the covers and tried to go back to sleep.

Darkness, still embarrassed, lay down next to me. “...You know, now that you mention it, when we first met, I never imagined we would be close enough to snipe at each other like this. I felt like I could hardly talk back then. Like I wasn’t so good at getting my feelings across... Like there was more distance between us...”

The room was dark and quiet. I listened to Darkness talk. Finally, I said, “Hmm, being a noblewoman, you really shouldn’t be able to get all buddy-buddy with a guy you just met... I do remember you being more reserved back then. You never lectured me, and you sure never argued with me. Back then, I thought you were sexy and a little weird but also a bit mature...” I lay on my back as I talked, and Darkness gave a quiet chuckle.

“Back then, I thought you could stand to be a little more honest, but I took you to be a hard worker, someone loyal and true and kind. Someone who wouldn’t dirty his hands with evil deeds.”



Suddenly, she rolled over so she was facing me.

“And now you think I’m a disloyal backstabber, unkind and eager to stain my hands with evil? Gee, thanks.”

“That’s not what I said, was it?” Darkness chuckled again. “Hey, Kazuma...” She sounded like she was about to ask me about the weather or something.

“Hmm?” I casually turned my head so I was looking at her.

“...Do you like Megumin?”

5

It was cloudy outside. There was a full moon tonight, but only the faintest light seeped in through the window now. Just enough to give me the barest idea of Darkness’s expression.

But then...

“S-sorry, I guess that was a weird question.” She was getting embarrassed again; I could see her smooth, pale skin flushing red.

The question had come up so suddenly that I didn’t quite know how to respond... “Uh, I mean, I sure don’t hate her. So yeah, I guess you could say I like her. ’Course, I like Aqua, too. And, uh, you, naturally.”

Darkness went quiet at that. “...I know what you’re trying to say. You don’t mean as a woman. You mean as an adventuring companion, right?” Lying there in the darkness, she sounded almost...lonely.

...Huh? What was going on here? This was one hell of a mood. Oh *shit*, it was *that* mood.

Even I, a virgin who had never so much as been on a proper date with a girl, could feel it. I got the distinct sense I shouldn’t let this conversation continue. That it would definitely, for sure go somewhere bad.

How did this keep happening? How did I, a virgin who had never even seen a boob, keep ending up in these situations? Like the one with Megumin the other day. How did I, a person who had never even been kissed, keep ending up with all these *adult* problems?

As I groped for a response, Darkness gave a gentle tug on the handcuffs. Just the slightest pull. That, of course, dragged my cuffed left hand closer to her.

“Tell me... What about Megumin? Do you...like her as a woman?” She took my left hand in both of hers. Her hands were warm.

Nearly petrified with fear, I thought about what I should say. My current status with Megumin was more than friends and less than

lovers. We'd agreed not to tell Aqua or Darkness, but maybe Darkness had figured it out anyway.

Megumin and I, we...

"I... I don't know. To be perfectly honest, I don't know, myself. But I don't hate her. I guess I probably do like her as a woman. For some reason, I feel calm when I'm with her. It feels weirdly...natural."

I just said what came to mind. I was confident that it was how I honestly felt in that moment. I didn't normally think too hard about it, but with all the times I had teased her—all the things we had been through together—I felt Megumin's presence growing bigger and bigger in my heart. And lying there across from Darkness in the dim moonlight, I simply told her how I felt.

I wonder why. I didn't try to throw her off the trail or hide my thoughts or anything, and I couldn't put a finger on the reason. I just told her, plain and simple.

"I see..." she whispered, and then she pressed my hand gently back into my chest. As abruptly as she had turned to face me, she turned away again.

.....

After that, Darkness was quiet, with no indication that she might say anything else. But when I was about to break the silence...

"I like things the way they are," Darkness whispered.

"The way they are"? What was that supposed to mean? Before I could ask, Darkness went on, with her back still to me: "...I like things the way they are. Aqua does something dumb and then cries about it, and you act all huffy, but you clean up after her all the same. Megumin unleashes her magic and destroys something, and you go to apologize with her. Or I say something stupid, and you get angry..." I could hardly tell what she was talking about. "Or you'll go to the lake for a picnic together, like I guess you guys did today with Megumin. You and I will argue about the silliest things. Aqua will suddenly beg to go on a trip somewhere, and you'll roll your eyes but still make plans..." Her voice had started to shake. "And then you say it would be nice to get a little vacation, but then wherever we go, somehow, we still end up in trouble..."

I reached out and touched Darkness's shoulder. "H-hey. I don't know what's wrong, but get ahold of yourself." I gave her shoulder a tug, trying to make her face me.

"But I know... I know if you commit to one person, everything will change. We won't be able to stay the way we are... Are you sure we can't stay this way? Just like this, forever...? With us thinking up every money-making scheme in the book to pay off our debts... Unexpectedly encountering absurdly strong enemies but still getting away with our lives... Can't we remain as we've always been?" She

refused to look at me while she spoke. And then... “Do you really want a lover? And...does it have to be Megumin?” She still wouldn’t turn toward me.

“U-um, well... Do I want a lover...?” I wasn’t sure how to continue.

“If all you want to do is make love to a woman, surely I can satisfy you. I can fulfill your desires, whatever they may be. I’ll endure anything... I’ll do anything...”

What was this idiot talking about?

“You’re making fun of me. No wonder I’m so riled up. That’s not what I want. What I want is... Well...” But I still didn’t know what to say.

What *did* I want?

That’s when I noticed Darkness’s shoulders trembling.

“...You’ve been acting weirder than usual all day today. Seriously, something’s wrong with you. Look, let’s get some sleep. And then tomorrow...”

But that was as far as I got before Darkness suddenly turned toward me. I caught my breath when I saw her face. She was crying. Big, wet tears were streaming down her cheeks. She firmly gripped the hand I had on her shoulder.

“Why can’t it be me...? Tell me, am I really not good enough for you...?!” she sobbed, her tears flowing ceaselessly.

6

I lay there with my hand on Darkness’s shoulder as she wept. I would’ve given anything in exchange for an adequate response.

I had no idea how much time had passed.

Finally, Darkness gently removed my hand from her shoulder. “...I guess I’m not showing you my best side,” she said, still red-faced and sniffing.

Having a girl cry in front of me was way too high a hurdle. Sure, I was always making Aqua cry, but this was different. In this moment, I knew I had to say something sensitive, but the words wouldn’t come. In fact, I had only a faint idea of why Darkness had started bawling in the first place. Maybe this was why I was still a virgin. Darkness looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. She seemed to be waiting for me to say something. But I wasn’t sure what I should say.

In the end, I couldn’t find any words and just lay there in uncomfortable silence. Darkness looked down and started mumbling. “...The truth is, under any other circumstances, I would already belong to that governor. But you saved me from that fate. You saved

me and won me my freedom. Now what I want most is to cherish this life... This happiness that you gave me. If it meant all of us could stay together just the way we are, then I would..."

.....

"You'd throw yourself at me? What are you, stupid? That's right—I remember you doing the same thing when it came to that governor, being all eager to sacrifice yourself. You've got me all wrong, Darkness. I'm not saying I want a lover because I want to do...you know...*that* sort of thing, and I'm not saying I wanna do it with just anybody. It's... I... Well, Megumin told me a while back how she feels about me. And ever since then, I... I sort of started to notice her more. And it was like...'Oh yeah, I guess I care about her, too.' At least, that's what I've started thinking..."

Even I didn't really know what I was trying to say, but Darkness kept her eyes downcast and listened intently.

"I do, too," she said finally, not looking up. "...I love you, too."

My heart skipped a beat... On the other hand, I had sort of already known. Now all I could do was swallow spit, unsure what to do.

"...It wasn't really clear to me at first. I just dimly felt like you were sort of my type. You... On the outside, you were a lazy perv who tried to coast through life by doing as little work as possible. You wanted to spend all day drinking, and you wound up deep in debt... Heh-heh."

This girl's "type" sounded like bad news. I knew one thing for sure: She was definitely *not* giving me a compliment.

"You better not forget, you were part of the reason we wound up in debt, too," I said.

Darkness chuckled again at that. "So, what? You want me to pay back my debt right now, with my body?"

"Sorry! Sorry, I won't say it again," I blurted, and Darkness's shoulders shook again, this time as if she was amused. She continued, still unable to meet my eyes. "...But in spite of all that, you went on to defeat one powerful opponent after another, and I felt so relieved. There was the guy with the enchanted sword, who was a lot stronger and more experienced than you. Generals of the Demon King with vastly higher levels. If I mentioned every single one, we would be here all night. But in any event, you always surprised me in the best way... When you threw money in the face of that governor, I thought my heart would burst."

.....

Okay, *that* was definitely a compliment.

"...You started out useless, but you changed over time. It didn't matter who you were facing or how strong they were. You belong to

the weakest class, and you don't even have any special equipment. You have a bow any amateur could find in a shop and a sword with a funny name...and with no more than that, you've managed to solve every problem and beat every challenge that came your way. You even managed to pay off that massive debt..."

As I listened to Darkness, I started to feel like I was actually pretty awesome.

"All of a sudden, you weren't quite my type anymore. Although to be fair, recently you've gone back to drinking all day and not doing any work... But you aren't the worthless man I dreamed of."

What was she getting at?

"I love you. I was drawn to you at first because you were the exact kind of worthless guy I was into. But somewhere along the line...you became my type. Whatever kind of person you become in the future, I'll still have feelings for you."

Damn, this sounded tough. I was happy, sure. Really happy.

"I love you... And you love Megumin, or so you say. But that doesn't stop me from caring about you... I have love for Megumin, too. And Aqua. I meant to keep all this stuff inside forever, if that was what it took to keep us all together. But..." She finally looked up, looked me right in the eye. "That stuff Megumin's mom said the other day. She said Megumin said she wanted to be more than friends." Darkness's eyes were still moist and red. The tears had left streaks down her face. "I guess I wasn't as strong as I thought... I guess I couldn't endure as much as I thought I could. I do like Megumin; I really do. But the thought of losing you to her... It's so painful and so scary." She seemed like a little girl, terrified of losing something that mattered to her.

"...Kazuma, are you...? Are you sure...it can't be me...?"

She sounded afraid of the answer.

Ugh, this was hard. I was happy; I really was. I was thrilled to hear Darkness's confession. And yet...as happy as I was, my heart felt like it was going to break.

"Darkness... Listen, I..." My chest hurt. It was agonizing. "Darkness, I definitely don't hate you, either. Hell, I've never in my life had a beautiful older woman fall in love with me."

The pain...

It hurt to speak. Dammit, why couldn't this world be more like a dating sim? Feeling like I might burst into tears from the sheer agony, I stared at Darkness, who *had* been crying, from about as close as it was possible to get.

"...Look, back in my home country, I never even had a single love

interest. I always assumed I'd live out my whole life without going on a date... I gave up hope of even having a real conversation with a girl... And now here you are, telling me how you feel about me. Of course that makes me happy." Darkness was watching me closely, trying to figure out what I was getting at. She looked like her heart was in just as much pain as mine. If only this could be like a novel, or a game, or one of those harem manga. "But...I'm really sorry. There's already someone I'm interested in, so I can't say 'Yeah, I like you, too' when someone else confesses to me. I don't have enough experience to know how to play it two ways at once, and I'd like to think I'm a *slightly* better person than that anyway. I can't return your feelings."

It would have been nice if this alternate world happened to embrace polygamy. It would have been nice if everyone could have been happy without me having to actually choose anyone.

Nice. Sure. But that wasn't how it worked. Darkness closed her eyes softly and turned away from me again.

We lay there for I don't know how long, neither of us saying anything. At last Darkness whispered, "...Thank you for being honest. I'm sorry I made things hard for you." As she spoke, she sat up, a smile spreading across her face. It was her usual confident grin. A calm smile backed by real strength. She brushed her hair away from her face, still smiling, then stood up, crossing her arms as if everything was great now. And then, with tremendous confidence and affection, she smiled at me again. Finally, she pointedly turned so her back was to me.

"...All right, then, Kazuma. I'll see you tomorrow... I can't help it; I really do like you. You could have diverted that conversation in any number of ways, but you gave me closure instead..."

As she spoke, Darkness headed for the door of the—

Hey!

"Just a—!"

There was a jangle of the chain. Darkness, completely caught up in the passion of the moment, had been trying to make her exit with a dramatic speech, but she'd completely forgotten we were still attached at the wrist.

"Hrf?!"

The chain yanked violently on her right hand. It dragged me up out of bed and spun her half around so she slammed face-first into the side of the bed.

.....

I couldn't tell if she was hurt. She wasn't moving. "...H-hey, are you okay...?"

She didn't look up at me. She just sat there on the carpet. Then

she buried her face in her knees. Her shoulders were shaking gently again. Then I saw the tops of her ears getting red...

“.....Pffft!”
“Hrk?!”

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. Maybe I really was hopeless.

7

“I'm gonna kill you! And then I'll die myself!”

“And come morning, Aqua will happily resurrect us both. I know, I know! I'm sorry I laughed! But what was I supposed to do? This is your fault, too, you know! After all that tension... How could I not laugh?!”

It was the middle of the night, and we were having what you might call a chain death match.

“I was being so serious! When a woman works up the nerve to confess her feelings to you, it doesn't matter what happens after; you should *expect* to die if you laugh at her! ...Oh yeah... That's just the kind of guy I'm dealing with...! Hey, at least let me get in one punch!”

No fair!

“But you just...! You looked so serious, and when you tried to leave...! Pffft... Bwa-ha-ha...!” Just the memory of the moment was enough to make me laugh again.

Darkness yelled, “You're dead!” as she made a grab for me.

“H-hey, I'm sorry, okay? I get it! My bad! I shouldn't have laughed! One hit! I'll let you land one punch, and then you'll forgive me, okay?”

Darkness lowered the fist she had raised at me. “...Okay, fine. Stand right there and close your eyes.” She was breathing hard and glaring at me. I was scared. Very scared, to be honest! Dammit, could I even take one punch from a powerhouse like Darkness?! I could, right? I hoped...

“Here goes. Ready?”

I stood on the carpet, eyes closed, as Darkness took up a fighting stance. I steeled myself. “Y-yeah, come at me!” I said, my eyes still squeezed shut...when something brushed my face. I flinched—just about jumped, actually—but it was only Darkness's hand, touching my cheek.

No sooner had I registered what it was than I felt something soft pressing against my lips.

“...?!”

I'd never been kissed before, but even I knew what was happening. I opened my eyes to see Darkness, red up to her ears and still looking angry but caressing my cheek with her left hand. She pulled away from me, and the tip of her tongue peeked out, just barely brushing past my lips.

“Wh-why, you...!” I said, feeling like I should object somehow but not actually sure what to say. Before I could find the words, Darkness tugged on the chain between us, pulling my left hand toward her. She took my wrist, leaning close to my ear. “...I really meant to let it go, but I gave up on giving up on it. I'm older than you and Megumin, and I'm noble, to boot. Starting tomorrow, I'll keep my distance from you, and I won't try anything. But I want one last chance...”

With that goose-bump-inducing whisper, and still holding my wrist, she pushed me onto the bed!

“Hey, wh-what do you think you're doing, Darkness?! Hold on! I don't like where this is going! I don't like where this is headed one bit!” As soon as I hit the sheets, she was on me, and I was desperately trying to decide what to do.

Darkness, her face red and her breath coming hard, said, “You're always calling me perv this and ero that, like Perviness and Lewdness and whatever else...! All right, I'm a pervert! I admit it! And I'm going to keep you up all night! I'll have my way with you till the crack of dawn!”

“Okay, I get it—just calm down. At this rate, we're both gonna have our first times, and I think that's really a pretty serious—Look, calm...down?!”

I tried to sit up, but Darkness grabbed my left hand with her right and leaned into me, forcing me back onto the pillow. That, of course, left me horizontal. Still pushing my left hand into the pillow, she mounted me, straddling my hips.

This was bad. Really, really bad. I knew what kinds of things happened in this position.

“Seriously, Darkness, dial it back! Stop! This is the endgame we're talking about—!”

I was trying to talk her down, but Darkness leaned in so her face was next to mine, panting heavily and brushing my cheek with her left hand. “I seem to remember you shoving me into bed once in my own home... Well, today the roles are reversed...!”

This was getting way out of hand. How, you ask? Well, the rest of me might have been lying down, but one part of me was standing tall and proud.

“...? Oh...”

I guess it was inevitable that she'd notice it, considering she was straddling me. Darkness made a little embarrassed sound. She didn't act like she was going to get off me, though.

No! Don't get swept away! Don't let this porn-game nonsense get to you! Keep your cool, Kazuma Satou! Are you really going to betray Megumin?!

That was just yesterday! It was only just yesterday that Megumin and I had decided to be more than friends and less than lovers! If I gave in to my urges now, of all times, I would be betraying everything Megumin felt for me...! Yes, even though I could always say I had no hope of resisting Darkness's sheer physical force, even then...!

Darkness looked a little embarrassed, but she caressed my cheek again, drawing her face closer to mine.

“S-stopp! Don't do this, Darkness! Damn, I'm stuck...! Someone from the weakest class like me doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell of beating you in a contest of strength...!”

While I shouted at Darkness, I took my free right hand and...!

...My free right hand?

“Hey, Darkness, you forgot about my right hand! It's just hanging out here! You're supposed to use your left hand to grab my right so I can't resist! Otherwise, you'd better watch out for all the dangerous skills I have, like Drain Touch!”

“Huh? Oh...!” Darkness, startled, pressed down on my right hand like I'd instructed.

Damn. That meant both my hands were trapped now.

Shit, here I finally had Megumin, but now I was completely at Darkness's mercy...! I squirmed desperately beneath her.

“...Hey, Darkness, why'd you stop?”

“Huh...? O-oh, I just... It took both my hands to hold you down, and now I'm not sure what to do next...”

She had me pinned and *that* was what she was worried about?

“Dumbass, what do you think you have a mouth for?! I'm already half-naked; don't you realize you can take that mouth and do whatever you want to me?!?”

“Oh! Y-yeah, right...” Darkness didn't sound very confident as she leaned toward my neck, her tongue darting out from between her lips...!

...And then, maybe getting a late case of cold feet, she hesitated at the last second, her tongue almost—but not quite—brushing my skin.

I couldn't help groaning piteously. “Ugh, that's my Perviness! What a tease! But I won't break! ...Seriously, though, hurry up and do it already!”

“Oh, s-sure! All right, here I g-go...!” Darkness's tongue reached

out farther...!

“H-hang on! I’m really straining, like, down below! Before you do anything, please just loosen my belt a bit! I mean, you can even accompany it with a classic line like ‘Your mouth says no, but your body says yes...!’”

“S-sure, okay...! Your mouth says no, but your body says yes...!”
Darkness let go of my hands so she could get at my belt...!

“Dumbass, who lets go of *both* hands?! You need to hold one of them down so I can’t resist!”

“Oh! R-right, sorry!” she said, apologizing reflexively.

“Okay, listen. I hate to say it, but you need to get off me for a second. You want to come at me from the side, like I’ve been asleep... Right, like that, and then you want your right forearm to hold my left wrist, and then you reach out with the same arm and hold on to my right wrist... Yeah, there you go. See how that leaves your left hand free? Good, now you can prevent me from being able to get up by shoving that huge rack of yours against my midriff or my chest...!”

“Oh, y-you mean like this...? I see. Now I can use my left hand to get your belt...!”

And so, with my help, Darkness managed to get a handle on powerless, unable-to-resist me and reach for my belt...!

“Eeeyow-ow-ow-ow! Why would you make it *tighter*?! You’re supposed to loosen it! Take the belt *off*! But take your time with it and say...y’know, ‘Heh-heh... Looks like you’re having a tough time...!’ or whatever!”

“R-right! S-sorry I’m so bad at this...! Heh... Heh-heh... Looks like you’re having a tough time...! I see you’ve stopped saying ‘no’...!”

“Great work! Nice ad-libbing!”

Darkness reached down for my belt as I watched, helpless, and...

“Huh? Wh-wha—?”

“Hey, let’s go! Pick up the pace! Double time! And while you’re down there, don’t forget that after my belt comes off, your mouth’ll have full access to *every* part of me down there, so think *long* and *hard* about what you’d like to do next...!”

At that moment, the door came flying open. Standing in the doorway were a displeased Megumin and a very tired Aqua.

I didn’t miss a beat. And so I shouted:

“Heeeelllllp! She totally jumped me!”

“Wha—?!”

Aqua had a key in her hand. One that undid the handcuffs with a clatter. She had found the key using the powers she was always bragging about, the ones she claimed let her see in any level of darkness. And as for Megumin, who had slapped Aqua awake...

Apparently, she had cashed in her one demand of Aqua—which she'd won in their earlier card game—to force her to look for the key Darkness had lost. And why had she done that?

"Ugh, it's the middle of the night, and you two are disturbing the peace...! I told you to be friends! Not to spend the entire night shouting at each other!"

It was lecture time. Darkness was seated formally on the carpet in my room. "...I-I'm sorry about that..." She bowed her head before Megumin, who stood assertively above her, arms crossed.

"I'm so sleepy," Aqua chimed in. "I worked really hard finding that key, and I wanna go to bed." Megumin duly thanked Aqua for her help, and she tottered off to bed. As for me, now free of the cuffs, I was sitting on the edge of my bed, kicking my legs and listening to Megumin's diatribe.

I took my turn having a shot at Darkness, whose head was still bowed. "Man, you really are a sicko. It's bad enough the way you crept up on me, full of lust, while I was slumbering peacefully. But then, as hard as I tried to resist, you went and...!"

"What?! Wh-why, you son of a—!" Darkness glared at me from the floor.

...As did Megumin.

"....."

Confronted with an expression that said she knew everything, I slid off the bed and assumed a formal seated position beside Darkness. "I, uh...somehow feel like this is where I belong."

"You assume correctly," Megumin said, and Darkness shot me a *take that* smirk. *Bitch...*

Megumin looked at us both and sighed. "I swear. You only had to spend *one* night together. I thought it might make you a little more open with each other, but instead... Darkness, were you able to tell him what you wanted to tell him?"

"...?!"" Both of us stared openly at Megumin. Just how much had she figured out? Man, Crimson Magic brains were nothing to sneeze at. Seriously, why didn't she normally act this smart?

"Er, um... Megumin, I'm sorry..." Darkness sniffed.

"What are you apologizing for?" Megumin said. "It's not my place to say anything about this issue. You should be more honest with yourself. It's not as if Kazuma and I are proper lovers yet, and I know Kazuma's restless nature too well to feel completely certain of whom he will choose. Were you able to communicate your own feelings to

him, Darkness?" She sounded like a fully grown adult. And then she smiled sweetly at Darkness.

Darkness, still sniffing, balled up her fists and braced them against her knees before she nodded vigorously. Megumin's expression got even happier. To me, she somehow seemed like a mother, gently looking on as her kid tried to make their own way in the world. I wondered why my chest hurt a little when I saw Megumin that way. Was this...you know? Like, I wanted her to be a little more jealous or something? Or maybe her remark about not knowing who I would choose just straight-up hurt.

Honestly, even I knew I could be a real pain in the neck.

Then Megumin smiled at me, too, as if she already understood the whole emotional mess in my heart. "How resourceful you are. Taking care not to burn any bridges. You know, if you could apply that same wit to awesomely destroying a monster every once in a while... Well, I'd like to see that."

Darkness continued to nod. Geez, and here she'd told me that she wanted a worthless guy who never worked. But she still wanted him to pay his taxes? What?

"Looks like I'm beat...," I said, smiling at the two of them. They both smiled back. Finally...

"By the way, purely out of curiosity, I take it nothing actually did happen?" Megumin asked, sounding just a tad uneasy.

...*Hey, was that a touch of jealousy I heard?*

"No, nothing," Darkness said promptly. "He resisted too hard and wouldn't let me get away with anything." She shot me a teasing look. Why did I have the feeling I was being punked?

Megumin, relieved, gave Darkness something of a triumphant grin. So I let it out real casual-like.

"...Oh yeah, come to think of it, that ambush Darkness sprang on me when I had my eyes closed earlier was my first...hmm, whaddaya call it again?"

""...?!""

Megumin looked stricken, and Darkness stared at the ground.

Chapter 4

May We Extend a Loving Hand to This Orphanage!

1

The next morning...

Given the night's events, I had been way too restless to get any sleep.

"G-good morning, Kazuma... You're up early..." Darkness yawned as she came into the living room. She looked like she hadn't gotten any sleep, either. I was downstairs because I had decided to get a start on breakfast.

"I'm not *up* early. Thanks to you, I never got to sleep. First Megumin, now you. Honestly, do you people get your kicks teasing guys or something? Do you really love me? Or do you just love tormenting me?"

"H-how can you say that...?! No, forget it. I'm sorry about last night. I don't know what came over me. To find myself on the receiving end of so much kindness from a younger woman like Megumin... I'm a failure as a noble... I wish you would forget all about it..." She looked at the ground as if deeply regretful.

"How the hell am I supposed to forget about it?! An older noblewoman handcuffed me, practically stripped me half-naked, and stole my first kiss. How often does that happen to a guy?"

"That's not what I meant! Er, although I'd appreciate if you would forget that stuff, too!"

Blushing furiously, Darkness pounded the table, causing the uncharacteristically early-rising Aqua to say, "What are you so excited about this early in the morning? Is it because you got to spend the night with this guy? You can't get carried away, Darkness. I know your sex drive is a lost cause, but you should have more respect for yourself."

“You sure know how to hurt a guy, Aqua. But hey, I know how this goes. Megumin and Darkness are going to tear each other apart over me. You’ll get all lonely because you feel left out, and it’ll finally cause you to realize how you really feel,” I said around a mouthful of toast.

“You mean I’ll realize I should have forced you to reform your life sooner, you dumb NEET?”

“No, I don’t! I mean you’ll see that the guy you always thought was merely your housemate is actually someone you have very special feelings for. But I’m sorry, Aqua. You’re the one person I absolutely refuse to recognize as a member of the opposite sex. I feel the same way about you as I do about Emperor Zel or Chomusuke.”

“Now, hold it right there. Why do I feel like I just got shot down?”

It was one of our usual dumb arguments, and first thing in the morning, too. Darkness, dressed like a schoolteacher for some reason, interjected, “Listen, you two, I’m going to be late coming home tonight. Go ahead and have dinner without me. I’ll be spending the night at my family’s house...” She sounded weirdly reluctant.

What was with her mood? Was she really that bothered about what had happened last night? I mean, I had pretty much turned her down. I would have been surprised if it *didn’t* bother her...

...We had kissed. That had to be it. In the past, we’d snuggled up under the covers and held hands and stuff, but kissing was further than we’d ever gone before.

So why did this still feel like a middle-school romance to me?

At the same time, this also meant I was no longer your average, everyday virgin.

“What’s with you, Kazuma? Your face is even more reprehensible than usual,” Aqua said, truly repulsed. How rude.

“Blind as ever, Aqua. Take a good look. This is the face of a man who’s popular with the ladies.”

“Oh, I’ll bet. Especially that cowlick on the back of your head.”

Hey, come to think of it—

“If you’ve got some time to kill, wanna go to the Adventurers Guild? You don’t have anything else to do, right?” I really wanted to go to the Guild. Then I could brag about how I had kissed someone and finally become an adult. I wouldn’t give any details as to the “who,” of course.

“Please don’t treat me like some layabout. Today, I’m going to take Emperor Zel outside of town and hunt monsters. I want him to get some experience points while he’s young. If I train him in heroism now, by this time next year, it’ll be good-bye, Demon King’s castle!”

“The only thing I see in your future is that chick getting eaten by a frog. Where’s Megumin anyway?”

“She left really early. I don’t know where she went. She said she wanted to talk to Yunyun about some kind of womanly victory.”

Great minds think alike, I guess. I wasn’t so sure about *victory*, though. We weren’t even officially lovers yet, right? And besides, we weren’t supposed to tell Aqua or Darkness. How was Yunyun okay?

After fretting about my assessment for a moment, Aqua lifted Zel, who was sitting in her hands, until she was eye to eye with him and said, “You’re right—at a time like this, we should go to the Guild. I think I *will* go with you, Kazuma. I can grab someone who looks like they’ve got some time to kill and get them to help me level the Emperor up.”

“I don’t think anyone’s going to be crazy enough to help you level up your chick... But whatever, let’s hit the Guild!”

2

When we arrived, we discovered that the mood had changed completely.

“We need another spell-caster for a frog hunt!”

“We’re short two members for our vanguard! Anyone with metallic armor who fits the bill?!”

“Goblins have been sighted near the forest! Everyone’s favorite: a nice, plump reward for some goblin hunting! We’re looking for more people than usual just in case there’s a Beginner’s Bane around! Anyone with money troubles, come talk to us!”

“If there’s anyone who thinks frog hunting sounds too difficult, how about a dungeon run with me? My plan is to skirt any combat and go right for the treasure chests! Thieves are especially welcome! Reward to be discussed!”

All these adventurers, whom I normally would have expected to find lounging around the Guild bar, were full of spirit today. It reminded me of the time Komekko had fired everyone up with her praise. I collared an adventurer I knew: a guy with a scar on his nose. “Hey, what’s going on here? Why’s everyone working so hard? This isn’t like you guys.”

If everyone was actually doing their jobs, then I couldn’t laze around all day anymore. I felt my pulse quicken, like when I had an exam coming and I saw everyone else studying diligently.

“Oh hey, Kazuma. Hell, you oughta know. Taxes, my man, taxes. Everyone here got dragged in by those tax collectors yesterday. They got half their funds taken away. You better believe they’re all feeling light in the pocket.”

It’s true. Adventurers love to spend money. The people here had

bought their way into decent lodgings at the inn. They'd already grown used to a certain standard of living, and they didn't want to downgrade. They were all searching desperately for some low-risk, high-reward quest. It looked like there were more than enough people to take out those monsters around town that Darkness and the Guild staff had been worried about.

"Kazuma, Kazuma, with all these people here, I bet *someone* will help me level up Emperor Zel. They look pretty busy, though..."

"I think it depends on how much you're willing to pay. Speaking of which, do you even have any money?"

At that, Aqua thrust Emperor Zel into my hands and took out her purse... "I have this ticket that entitles the bearer to one free confession hearing at the Axis church. Think anyone will work for that?"

"I doubt it. They'd probably tear your ticket up on the spot. Everyone's got cold, hard cash on the brain at the moment."

Still, this was a problem. I'd been eager to find my various drinking buddies and brag to them about how I had thrown wide the gates of adulthood, but...

That was when it happened.

"Hey, it's Kazuma! The tax guys told us something interesting! They said the surprise collection was Lalatina's idea!"

I knew the guy shouting at us. He'd spotted me when I walked through the door. He looked pretty pissed about the tax situation. I guess he hadn't gotten away, either.

"Hey, hey, Aqua, Darkness, and I all got chased around just like the rest of you. So why are you complaining to me? From what I hear, the idea behind the collection was to get all you lazy-ass adventurers to go back to work and get some cash in the country's coffers to boot."

He didn't look happy to hear that. "Fine, whatever, so I haven't been workin' much lately. We still cleaned up all those leftover quests, though..."

Another nearby adventurer picked up the thread. "Why does the country need our money anyway? What are they doing with our hard-earned cash? I'll tell you what. I've heard the rumors. They say Lalatina's had some little boy hanging around, that she's 'teaching' him something or other."

Now, that was a bombshell.

"That Darkness!" Aqua exclaimed. "Now she's into little boys?! Does her appetite know no bounds?!"

Uh, laying a hand on a kid was one line I knew even Darkness would never cross... Probably...

Besides, there was also that single-mindedness she'd shown me last night. I had nearly broken into tears myself, and I was the one turning her down. If I found out she was secretly into little boys on the side, I might wind up in front of Lady Eris again.

Then Aqua shot a glance around. "I think this is my moment, Kazuma. Look at the greed in everyone's eyes." She turned a pleading expression on the room full of adventurers.

"You're one to talk, Aqua. Remember when you dropped your hundred-eris coin in the harbor on your way to buy ice cream and started bawling?"

"Hush, you brigand. If you insist on spreading the worst possible rumors about people, I'll punish you by cursing your sheets to be damp in the morning... But I have more important things to do right now." She returned her attention to the now-silent Guild. "I want you to know that Darkness has been acting funny recently. As her guardian, I want to help her with whatever's on her mind." She held up Emperor Zel, whom she had been clasping to her chest, with pride. "I keep wondering what that girl gets up to. Come on, everyone—don't you want to know what Darkness spends her time doing?"

We were at a small orphanage on the edge of town. Eris parishioners could bring food, and the wealthier people in town could donate items they didn't need. And a train of adventurers, led by Aqua and me, was lined up in front of the establishment.

"Hey, mister, are you sure Darkness is here?"

"Oh, I'm sure, Miss Aqua. I've seen Lalatina around these parts, wearing the sexiest clothing and ogling the children. Believe me, I wouldn't lie to you."

I wasn't so sure about the ogling-children thing, but the part about sexy clothing sounded awfully believable. I steeled myself and prepared to knock on the door...

...when I heard a kid's voice on the other side.

"Lady Lalatina, you can't... We're still way too young for this..."

3

The voice sounded like it belonged to a boy who hadn't even hit puberty yet. He seemed absolutely miserable.

"Don't be silly; there's no time like the present. Besides, it's something you're bound to learn eventually as you grow up. Come on, now—don't be shy..."

“B-but, Lady Lalatina...”

Hey.

I tried to convince myself that there had been some sort of mistake, but that was definitely Darkness. Forcing myself not to tremble, I pressed my ear to the orphanage door. The other male adventurers gathered around me and did the same. Actually, that wasn't all. More than a few interested female adventurers joined me, too.

“Ha-ha, say what you like, but I know *this* is what you're really interested in, isn't it? Go ahead—touch it.”

Hey, hey, hey!

That sounded a lot like what she'd said when she had me pinned last night! Dammit, why wasn't there some kind of eavesdropping skill in this world? I really wanted to know what was going on in there!

...No, hold on... It was too soon to give up. I still had my Second Sight skill, so maybe there was a skill that would let you see through walls or something. I would have to ask somebody later.

Someone swallowed audibly. Who was it? Maybe it was me.

“Here, touch it. It's yours now.”

“M-mine...?” the boy said hesitantly, but there was a hint of corruption in his voice.

“*It's yours,*” indeed. And after all that stuff she'd said to me last night! Could it be that my shooting her down had caused her to implode...? And what was this prickle in my heart? Was it a touch of jealousy at having Darkness stolen away by someone I didn't even know? And by a younger guy, at that?

No, wait, wasn't this just how any guy felt when a good female friend of his got a boyfriend? I mean, even if he hadn't personally been interested in dating her...

“How does it feel?”

“Harder than I expected. And smooth...”

I was starting to grasp the situation. What the hell was she getting him to touch anyway? Something smooth and harder than you might expect?

“You can do more than touch it. Take a sniff. How does it smell?”

Damn, even I had never smelled one of those. I was feeling some strange excitement. Was this the pulse-quickenning sensation of being cuckolded? I hadn't thought that was my thing, but...

“Come on, everyone—aren't you going to go in? I'm sick of just standing here. I'm heading inside.” Aqua, thoroughly unable to read the situation, as usual, reached for the door.

“Aqua, dammit! Wait a—!”

But before I could stop her, she pushed the door open, and we saw...

“How do you like it? A brand-new, freshly made book has such a unique smell. I love the aroma of this ink.”

“I agree; I don’t dislike this smell, Lady Lalatina...”

The scene revealed in the open doorway looked strangely familiar... Yes, it appeared to be a classroom, and Darkness was handing a book to a boy who gratefully inhaled the aroma.

All the adventurers, including me, stood there in a stupor, watching the boy with his new textbook, until Darkness turned around and noticed us.

“H-hey, what are *you* doing here...?”

That’s what *I* wanted to ask *her*. Actually, what *was* she doing here? To me, she was the spitting image of a teacher in a suit handing out textbooks to these poor kids at this orphanage.

“Hey, Darkness, whatcha doin’ here? It kinda looks like a school,” offered Aqua, still oblivious.

“Er, y-yeah. I remembered Kazuma talking about how some countries have free schools and academies where kids can learn. Ever since then, we’ve been running a pilot program teaching kids who can’t afford tutors at home...”

The kids, meanwhile, stared at us adventurers with sparkling eyes. To them, we were probably heroes who did battle with evil monsters. And the looks had the same effect on the adventurers that they’d had coming from Komekko: Everyone smiled.

“So you’ve been doing this for a while now, Darkness?” I asked. It would explain why her clothes had looked like they belonged to a schoolteacher...even if the schoolteacher herself was secretly a depraved lunatic.

“Yeah, I have. It’s been a while, I guess. As for the clothes I’m always wearing, I gather that they’re a schoolteacher’s uniform in this one country. After all, one should dress for the job they want, right?”

Whoops, was this another little “gift” from one of my countrymen?

“My father has heard much about educational systems like this throughout his life. He raised enough money to support this experimental school out of the family’s finances.”

Oh yeah. I seemed to recall Darkness’s dad being a top-notch politician or something. I thought someone had told me that the only school in this country was in Crimson Magic Village, but I guess they had already gotten some cues from other Japanese people and had started doing things on their own. Impressive.

“Honestly, though, I’m not much of a teacher, so I was always too embarrassed for everyone to see me like this...” Darkness blushed and looked at the other adventurers. “Which reminds me, why *did* you

come here?"

Well, to peek in on her, obviously...

Okay, even I couldn't say that. And I *definitely* couldn't say we'd thought maybe she'd been skimming something off our tax payments to purchase young boys for her own enjoyment. Everyone looked away until their eyes settled on me, as if to say I should be the one to do something.

"Well, you know, there was that kerfuffle about the taxes the other day and everything, right? We wanted to know how our tax money was being spent, so we came to see the school! Man, it sure is inspiring to know our money is helping these young kids! Really puts a spring in your step! Right, you guys?"

"Sure does! We always trusted Lalatina!"

"Lalatina knows how to use her name, huh!"

"You're awesome, Lalatina!"

"And adorable, Lalatina!"

"Shut up—stop calling me that! I swear I'll beat you all senseless!" said Darkness, fuming. I couldn't help noticing, though, that the little boy standing beside her clutching his textbook still looked weirdly apologetic. Darkness saw it, too, and crouched down beside him. "What's the matter? Just enjoy your new book."

"B-but I heard it was the adventurers' money that paid for all our food and clothes here, and this book, too..."

.....

Silence descended on all the adventurers standing in the room. Darkness smiled gently at the boy. "That's true. They spend their days fighting monsters and protecting all of you. And then they even give up some of the money they make so that children without parents can have food and clothes. So just remember to be grateful to them and cherish that book, too. Okay?"

"...Okay, I will. Thanks, mister!" the boy said to me, smiling, and soon all the kids in the orphanage were showering us with gratitude. Every adventurer present felt a tear come to their eye.

Then Darkness said, "I have to talk with these people, so why don't you all study your books for a while?" And then she motioned us to step outside...

"I can't believe you all saw me this way," Darkness said once we were outside.

"Hey, Darkness. Is this orphanage really run with the money you scammed off us?" I asked.

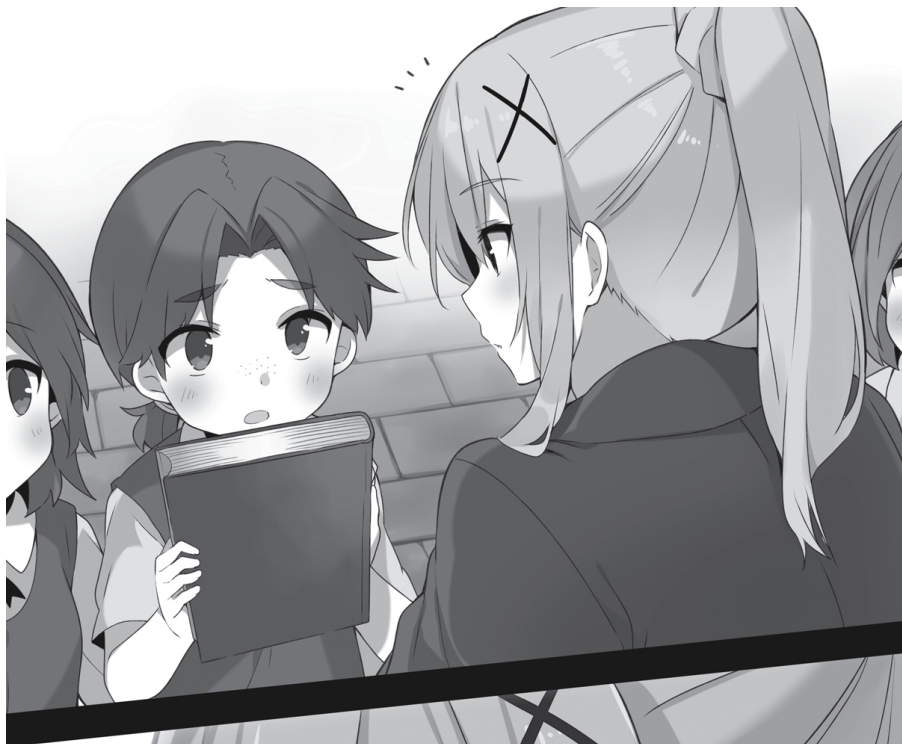
“Don’t say ‘scammed’—people will get the wrong idea. The tax money we *collected* from the adventurers is earmarked to help care for adventurers permanently injured on the job, or ones too old to work, and so on. An adventurer’s future has always been a pretty tenuous thing. This should provide some security for your post-adventuring years—a pension that will at least help you put food on the table, right?”

“H-huh, okay. But those kids... You told them...”

She’d told them this was all thanks to us.

“The costs of their upbringing and education are mostly covered by the Dustiness family, but as embarrassed as I am to admit it, we had some trouble with fundraising. Just a bit. So I did take a *little* bit of a loan from the money we collected the other day... But don’t get the wrong idea, okay?! We’re going to pay it back—I swear! So many people were wounded during the cleanup of those leftover quests from before. Paying for their care really set us back...”

Man, this was weird. She was the one talking about being embarrassed, but somehow we were the ones who found we couldn’t meet her eyes. I shot a glance around and saw everyone else was as red-faced as I was.



Finally, Darkness said, “So that’s how your tax money is actually being used... Does it sound okay to you...?” She appeared genuinely sorry.

“Uh, look, when we heard you were teaching these little kids, Lalatina—! I mean, if that’s how our taxes are helping, then it’s fine... Right, guys?”

“Yeah, we were just worried. We know you, Lalatina, and we were afraid you were having some kind of trouble and were trying to handle it all by yourself again!”

“That’s so true, and we were totally worried, and then it turned out our dear, sweet Lalatina was working right here all along! Isn’t it great?”

“We’re all adventurers together. Doesn’t even matter that you’re a blue blood! Hey, does this place need some crossing guards?”

So many beautiful offers of aid and help. It was downright refreshing to see they’d come this far (even if I wasn’t exactly to thank for their personal growth).

Darkness replied, “Thanks, but we don’t really need much help at the moment. I appreciate just knowing how you feel about this. As it happens, there’s already someone making sure all the kids get to school safely, not only here at the orphanage but the ones commuting from family homes, too. It’s the part-timer from that weird magic-item shop.” She smiled innocently. “But knowing you’re all behind me gives me the strength to persevere. Thank you. I mean it. I thought for sure that tax-collection stunt had poisoned things between us forever...”

“Whaddaya sayin’, Lalatina?!”

“That’s right, Lalatina, give us a little credit!”

“We could never doubt you, Lalatina!”

“I’m really happy to hear that, but *please* show a little more restraint in using my name...” She scratched a cheek in embarrassment as all the adventurers tried to walk back their attitudes.

Which was the perfect time for Aqua, dense as ever, to start running her mouth. “Just a second, that’s not what any of you was saying before we got here. Hey, Darkness, listen! On the way over, Kazuma and all the others were saying—” Several adventurers clapped their hands over her mouth before she could get us all in a lot of trouble. “Hey, what are you doing?! Stop! Stop that!” she exclaimed, slapping away the hands that tried to grab her.

Hoping to distract Darkness from what was happening with Aqua, I said, “Gee, here I thought you were just some kinky noble, but it turns out you do have a good side. Wish we could see it a little more

often. Then maybe you wouldn't be so far behind on your life plan. You could be a happy mommy by now."

"What the hell are you talking about?! I'm not behind on any life plan! I've rejected marriage by my own choice! If I wanted to meet someone, I could! I'd have suitors up to my ears!"

That made one of the adventurers clap their hands. "Oh yeah, Lalatina, I heard you and Kazuma had a kid!"

As Darkness was struggling to absorb that remark, someone else chipped in. "Oh yeah, I heard that, too! Congratulations, Lalatina!"

"You're gonna have to get out of the habit of playing those weird games with yourself, Lalatina."

"I have to say, though, I'm so glad to see our dear, sweet Lalatina found somebody. She always left something to be desired as a member of the nobility, and I was worried it would cost her her chances!"

"Yeah, I was afraid she'd decide to go live with some monsters or something. I guess I can finally relax."

"And now *you're* all set for the future, too, Kazuma. At least you'll still be able to eat if you burn through your savings!"

So it was congratulations for us all around. From the grins and smirks, I guessed nobody really meant it. They were mostly teasing Darkness as payback for the other day.

"Argh, I did so much explaining then, and it turns out I didn't get through to you at all!" she shot back, blushing fiercely and totally missing the fact that they were only playing with her.

"Oh, we understand. We understand nobles have their circumstances to think of. It would make perfect sense if you didn't want to acknowledge her."

"Here's hoping we can all *publicly* celebrate your happy marriage to Kazuma one day!"

"You don't get it, do you?! None of you understands a thing!" Darkness howled.

"So, Kazuma, give us the *real* story. What went down between you two?"

"This is Kazuma we're talking about. I guarantee the answer is 'nothing.'"

"Yeah, Kazuma's famous for one thing, and it's an invincible chicken heart."

Ahhh, that brought back the real reason I'd wanted to go to the Adventurers Guild in the first place.

"All you riffraff who are still virgins and virginettes despite being rough-and-tumble adventurers, bow to me. I'm sure you assumed you could confidently count me among your number for life, but I'm here to tell you you're wrong. For last night, I crossed *that* line! Didn't I, Darkness?"

“You idiot! What are you talking about?! Who says that?” Maybe she was hoping to throw the others off the scent, but she just ended up digging herself a deeper hole.

“Sh-she admitted it... I can’t believe it! Lalatina admitted it!”

“What? No way! Sweet Lalatina, you really did it? Hey, how far did you go? Tell your big sis every last juicy detail!”

“I was so sure it was a misunderstanding! You can’t trust what Aqua says anyway...!”

“Wrong! You’re all wrong!!” Darkness blushed furiously, and I took the opportunity to score another hit.

“What are they wrong about? You’re the one who held me down and stripped me until I was almost naked. All this on my very first time... And you have the nerve to call *me* a liar?”

“I already apologized about that!”

“Girls aren’t the only ones who feel protective about their first time, you know. It means something to guys, too, and I don’t appreciate you treating it like it was an accident!”

“H-hey, that’s not what I...! I’m sorry—it was wrong of me! I just went a little crazy... Maybe we can agree to forget it ever happened...”

Everyone listening in seemed to think all this was completely serious, and I received looks of admiration and jealousy.

“Hey, a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell,” I said. “So I’ll leave the rest up to your imaginations.”

“Why, you low-down—! We never even—!” Darkness, finally cornered, was about to spill the beans on what had—or hadn’t—happened.

“Come to think of it, there was a golden-haired, blue-eyed girl in there who looked a lot like you, Lalatina. Hey, is that your kid?”

The question came from a female adventurer who looked very excited about it. Finally, unable to restrain themselves, the adventurers made to open the door of the orphanage again...!

“Can you guys just stop already...?!” said Darkness, her eyes welling up with tears. Her fists were clenched, and she was ready to throw up her hands.

But when the door opened, we found all those kids who had been so full of life just a few minutes before collapsed on the ground.

and learning, you mischievous ruffians? I have come to pick you up! Now, anyone who wishes to touch my mask, please line up. No pushing, now... Oh-ho, what's this?"

Crazy laughter announced the arrival to the chaotic orphanage of yet more trouble.

"Hey, what the heck do you think you're doing here? We don't have time to play with you. I'll pretend I didn't see you for today, so get out of here! That alleyway over there is nice and deserted; go do your laughing there. These kids are in danger, and we need to deal with this!" Aqua informed the newcomer. As all the other adventurers rushed around carrying blankets and arranging them so the kids had something to lie on, she stood in the center of the orphanage creating a massive magic circle.

"What in the world is this? My dear, peaceful orphanage brought to its knees... Are you not satisfied until you've caused trouble *every* place you go?"

"I'll thank you not to assume everything is my fault. These kids just collapsed all of a sudden, and no one knows why, least of all me. You sure *you* didn't do something to them?"

Vanir scowled and shot back, "Watch what you say, O crisis-bringing woman! I, with my great popularity among these children, would do no such thing! The only people I would ever curse are my natural enemies: Axis disciples and the likes of you!"

He came over to where I was using Freeze to cool the foreheads of kids with raging fevers and whispered, "This is most troubling, though. To find they've been infected with choleran..."

"Vanir, are you saying you know what happened to these kids? What kind of name for a disease is 'choleran' anyway?"

All eyes turned to Vanir.

"These mischievous ragamuffins are infected with choleran," he said. "This is a very unique disease. After it uses the host as a carrier for a certain amount of time, it releases a fast-acting poison, as you see now. My all-seeing eye tells me...that girl there is patient zero." And he pointed right at...Sylphina.

"There are two ways to treat choleran."

Vanir sat cross-legged on the floor inside Aqua's magic circle, which glowed faintly. I guess the circle was giving off healing magic, because the kids looked like they were sleeping a little easier than before.

"For those who aren't the carrier, it's simple enough. Continual application of antidote and healing spells should soon have them feeling like themselves again. However..." He turned to Sylphina, who

was slumped in Darkness's arms. "Simple antidote magic will not be effective for the carrier herself. Healing magic can preserve her strength and vitality in the meantime, but we'll have to whip up a special medicine."

"Where is this special medicine?! How do we make it?!" Darkness demanded, and Vanir held up several fingers.

"There are five ingredients. One, the onion of a Duxion. Two, a mandrake root. Three, a ghost's tear; four—"

Several adventurers hurriedly took notes on the ingredients.

"And finally—this is the hard one—you need a fingernail of a powerful demon."

"God Blow!"

When Vanir mentioned that last ingredient, Aqua slugged him, turning part of his body to dust.

"Dammit, woman! This is an emergency! There's no time for your silly games! Now part of me is dirtying the floor!"

"You're right—this *isn't* a time for silly games. That's why I attacked you! A ghost's tears are easy enough; we can probably get one just by heading home and telling a really sad adventure story. That demon's fingernail, though... I know you've got a few! Hand them over!"

Oh yeah. Vanir was a demon, for sure. But he slowly shook his head. "I myself use a temporary body to manifest in this world. Everything other than my mask truly is dust."

Aqua clapped her hands. "Well, I'll just go ask the girls at everyone's favorite shop, then. I'll be like, 'Sorry, all I need is a few stripped-off fingernails!'"



“Fool, I said a *powerful* demon. Those children won’t give you anything useful.”

I guess they were talking about the succubi. But if they couldn’t help us...

“I guess I have no choice. I shall have to use my familiar as a living sacrifice in the demon-summoning ritual passed down in the Crimson Magic Clan to these many generations...”

Darkness stopped Megumin before she could begin any bizarre rites. “Hold on, Megumin—I don’t think we need to go that far...! Vanir, don’t you know any other demons? Use your all-seeing-eye and find some!”

“...Hmm, well, I do know one who lives close to this town,” he said, brushing his mask with his hand anxiously.

“Who?! Where?!”

At Darkness’s urging, he finally told us...

Chapter 5

A Banquet for This Demon Count!

1

As Darkness and I hastily boarded the carriage she'd arranged to meet us at the Axel town gates, Aqua and Megumin watched us go, worried. They were going to stay here while we took care of business.

"I know you'll be able to manage water with Create Water, but what about food? Did you bring something? What about handkerchiefs and tissues? Hey, Kazuma, do you even know how to pitch a tent? I know you said you can't sleep on a strange pillow, so you've got yours, right?" Aqua fretted.

"What are you, my mom? You can stop worrying. I'm a veteran adventurer, don't forget. My level's pretty good, and it's not that bad a trip. Nothing to worry about. And I don't need my pillow."

Aqua truly resembled a mother watching her kids leave, and it was getting on my nerves.

"Okay, sure, but remember I won't be there this time, all right? Try not to get hurt. And definitely try not to get killed, because I won't be around to resurrect you. If you find anything weird on the ground, don't put it in your mouth, okay?"

Darkness flashed a subdued smile at Aqua. "Aqua, we've already been to Elroad and Arcanletia. Travel is nothing new to us."

"Your traveling party consists of one sheltered noblewoman and one homegrown NEET. Of course I'm worried."

Where did she get off roasting me like that? I would have been a lot *more* worried if it was her going and not me.

She pressed on. "And you, Darkness. Be careful when you get there. Do your best not to get attacked, okay?"

"No worries there. I'm a Crusader. Getting attacked by monsters is practically my job. I'll do everything I can to protect Kazuma..."

"Don't be silly, Darkness. The two of you are traveling all alone.

I'm telling you to be careful not to get attacked by *Kazuma*."

"Hey..." I took offense at Aqua's words, even when, at the same time, they left me feeling sort of fidgety.

"Yes, please do take care not to get attacked."

Et tu, Megumin? Why didn't anyone trust me?

"I don't believe I've ever once attacked a girl... Well, okay, so I seem to remember pulling a little something back at Crimson Magic Village, but... You know what? I'm sorry, never mind." Something in Megumin's eyes shut me up.

"Don't be silly, Kazuma. The two of you are traveling all alone. I'm telling you to be careful not to get attacked by *Darkness*."

Huh, so that was what she meant.

"Megumin, I'd appreciate if you didn't make me out to be some kind of pervert! Why in the world wouldn't you trust m—? Er, a-ahem, never mind." Darkness's shoulders slumped under Megumin's gaze. I guess she had some uncomfortable memories, too.

Gosh, now that I thought about it, they were right. We were going to be traveling together, just the two of us. I grew nervous. Especially considering how over these last few days, we'd become increasingly aware of each other, and it was getting sort of awkward. Suddenly I wasn't so sure about this. Were there really not going to be any "mistakes"? Especially with the two of us on a trip—a whole new environment—and us alone together, with no one to burst in on us... or stop us.

As I was starting to panic, Megumin handed me something.

"What's this?"

Some kind of magical item? Actually, it looked familiar, although I hadn't seen it in a long time...

"They were selling these at a discount at Wiz's shop. I gather it is a simple portable toilet for when you are on a trip. Take it with you just in case."

Not a bad idea. Using the bathroom while you were on the road could get tricky. Typically, it meant answering the call of nature, well, out in nature.

"Thanks, I'll take it... Hang on, what? Megumin, I seem to remember this thing having some sort of fatal flaw."

"I am given to understand that in order to mask the sounds of your toilet use, it plays music at a high volume while occupied. So if a certain someone tries to jump you, use the sound to scare her off."

What did she think this was, an air horn?!

"...Why do you even have one of these?! Look, there are kids in trouble! Even I wouldn't try to get up to any funny business right now!" Despite my objection, I tossed it in with the luggage, just to be on the safe side.

“Well, don’t worry yourselves about those children. Aqua and I will see to it that they get the support they need,” Megumin said and smiled at us. She and Aqua were going to stay behind in town and take care of the kids. Megumin had learned how to make potions in Crimson Magic Village, and she would get everything set up so that she could make the special potion as soon as we got back with the ingredients. I bought everything we could conceivably buy from local pharmacies and magic-item shops. Money makes the world go around, even here. And as for the other ingredients, many of the adventurers who’d been with us when the trouble started actually volunteered to help obtain them.

There was just one we still needed to account for: a powerful demon’s fingernail...

“Normally, I’d love to come along with you and personally strip a nail off some demon, but I need to help these kids, so I’ll have to put up with staying behind this time. Hey, Kazuma, after you get the nail, be sure to finish him off, won’t you?”

“Weren’t you listening to Vanir? He may be a demon, but he’s nobility around here, too.”

That’s right: We were about to set off for the castle of a certain nobleman of this country. Apparently, some seemingly human nobles were actually demons in disguise. Darkness just about swooned when she heard that, but we could deal with the implications once the kids were healthy again. Darkness and I had agreed to go negotiate with this monster, but...

“Kazuma, Kazuma.”

“What, more advice?”

Aqua held something out to us as we boarded the carriage. “It’s a prototype item from Wiz’s shop. A finished version of something you tried to do a long time ago, I guess. You never know what might happen on the road, so I thought you should have one, just in case.”

It was my attempt at a homemade contraceptive device. I flung it on the ground.

2

The carriage clattered along, with Darkness holding the reins. I’d been watching her as we went, and I was getting itchy with curiosity. “Hey, Darkness, let me try driving.” We were an hour outside of Axel, and I was tired of doing nothing but watching the scenery go by.

“Don’t be dumb. Driving takes actual skill. You can’t go too fast or too slow; you have to think about the pace the animal is walking at and how much energy it has left...”

“I’ve been watching you this whole time, and you’re just sitting there holding those ropes. Come on—let me try! I’m bored.”

It had been nearly two years since I’d come to this world, by my reckoning. There weren’t a lot of ways to amuse yourself around here, and I wasn’t going to miss my chance to drive a horse-drawn carriage. Wasn’t I here to be an adventurer? Er, even if I had gone full NEET lately.

“Fine, but only for a little while. Don’t pull too hard on the reins, though—you want to let the horse take care of almost everything.”

“Yeah, sure, I know how it works. You just sit here and occasionally sort of flick the reins.”

“Don’t flick them—that’s only for emergencies! Seriously, don’t do it, okay? I’m not bantering with you—I mean it.”

Sternly warned by Darkness, I gave an obedient nod. Then I said, “...I don’t see a hand brake, or even a steering wheel for that matter. And where’s the clutch on this thing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Keep your nonsense to yourself!” Darkness made to grab the reins back, but I held up a hand in a *wait* gesture. “Bah, I hate people who don’t understand a good cross-world joke.” And here I’d been deliberately trying to lighten the mood for the two of us.

Still, I couldn’t help noticing how odd Darkness had looked all day. In fact, it wasn’t only today. It was more like recently... Specifically, ever since she and I had expressed our feelings for each other...

“I’m not sure what a cross-world joke even is... We’ve got nothing but time until we come to the next town, so I’m going to spend the day interrogating you. I want answers to all the questions I’ve always had.” Gee, she was suddenly enthusiastic now that we had some distance from civilization. “For starters, where were you born?” She seemed less worried about my driving, at least; we’d switched places on the bench.

“I’m from Japan,” I replied. “One of the world’s economic superpowers and full of guys with black hair and black eyes like me.”

“*Ja-pan... Ja-pan...*” Darkness sat with her hands on her knees, muttering to herself.

“You have to at least have heard of it, right? The guys you describe as having weird names, most of them are from Japan.”

Darkness looked startled by that. “Yes, that’s right! They have hair just like yours, and they all seem to have some incredible power or other. Like that Mitsu-whatever-it-was, with his enchanted sword. No normal weapon could be that powerful... I wonder where he got it... Same with the others. The people who leave their names to history and legend so often seem to look a lot like you. B-but that would

mean..." Darkness swallowed and glanced at me expectantly... "Could it be you have some incredible power or spectacular equipment, too...?"

"Nope, nothing, not for me. I guess the only things I brought with me were my incredible Luck and amazing intelligence, along with a pinch of courage and a whole lot of adventuring spirit..."

I brushed my bangs away in an awesome manner, basking in Darkness's gaze of admiration...

"So what you're saying is, you're a completely ordinary guy with no special powers."

Oops, that wasn't admiration; it was pity.

"Hey, you've seen how much an ordinary guy can do! Don't give me that disappointed sigh—I think it's pretty incredible that an ordinary guy has done as much as I have! How about a little praise here and a touch of adulation?"

"I can't quite put my finger on it, but I feel like you've changed somewhat, just recently. Like you've become a bit more like Aqua, or maybe she's become a bit more like you... Or maybe you were always this way..."

Ohhh, she said that which shouldn't be said.

"We're nothing alike! She spends all day eating and sleeping and drinking and doing stupid stuff. I can't believe you think I have anything in common with—"

"You just described your everyday life."

I turned my attention to the horse, who was walking along contentedly. "Horses are pretty cute, huh? It's like, they've got those gentle eyes and stuff. Kittens and chicks are all right, but me, I'm all about horses."

"Hey, look at me. Look me in the eyes... Bah, fine, let's move on. You said once that you really owned in your country, right?"

Huh? "Owned"?

I gaped at her as if to ask what the heck she was talking about.

"Hey, don't look at me like that! You're the one who said it! You said you really owned back in your home country! You said people gave you all sorts of nicknames and everyone counted on you. You talked about how you and your friends assaulted fortresses and hunted major bosses; you said it was all you did all day..."

Had I?

Oh yeah, I had said something like that! What a dumb thing to say. I was pretty sure I had been telling them about my online gaming life.

"Yeah, sure, that's all true. But it's also in the past. I'd rather not remember it, so do me a favor and don't bring it up, okay?"

"Why not? It sounds like a really honorable past. Don't you want

to remember your comrades in arms? You should be proud of your martial accomplishments.” Darkness giggled, although I didn’t know why. “Or what? Are you embarrassed? You, the guy who never misses a chance to mention all the generals of the Demon King he’s defeated?”

...I guess it wouldn’t get me very far to object that those other stories were about an online game. Well, whatever. At least she was having fun...

“Say, Kazuma. You told us you could go back to your country... Don’t you ever miss your family?” She had her hands on her knees, and suddenly she looked very serious.

“Nope, not once since I got here. Frankly, I don’t have the time. You guys are too much of a handful. Heck, I’d practically forgotten all about my family until you mentioned them a second ago... Wait—ahhhhhh!”

“What, what is it?! An enemy attack?!” Darkness said, checking our surroundings anxiously.

“No, I just remembered! I can’t believe this! My little brother still owes me five hundred yen! He said he needed it to buy some stuff for his club, and he never paid me back!”

Darkness was thoroughly confused by that. “F-five hundred ‘yen’? How much is that? Is it a lot?”

“In your terms, I guess it’d be about five hundred eris.”

“Let him have it! You’re filthy rich anyway! I heard about what happened at the capital, how you tried to buy Lain off when it looked like she was going to send you home. And you didn’t hesitate to cause a scene at the castle. After you wrote that letter saying you’d gotten your memory back, Lady Claire and Lain sent a tearful message of apology and a bunch of presents. I gave them back because I felt bad for them, but...”

Hold up.

“Who gave you the right to send back someone else’s presents?! I still haven’t forgiven those two! Next time I see them, I’ll make them regret they were born women! It’ll be so bad, even *you’ll* be traumatized!”

“Say, um, what kind of trauma do you have in mind exactly? What level are we talking about...?”

“Cram it—you’re the worst! Quit blushing!”

And so our excursion went on. Darkness and I continued our trip without any monster attacks or harrowing encounters.

“Man, things sure are easy without Aqua around. Traveling like this is so peaceful.”

“Come on, Kazuma. I know Aqua isn’t always easy to live with, but I don’t think she attracts trouble on purpose. Though I must admit, this is pretty nice... Hey, tell me about those *samurai* you mentioned once upon a time. What kind of tribe are they? I want details.” Darkness had taken a pretty keen interest in Japan after we started talking about it, and I’d been telling her all about this, that, and the other thing as we trundled along.

“These samurai, they were no joke. I told you about those supersharp katanas they carried, right? If anything went wrong, they would cut open their own bellies.”

“Their own bellies?!” Darkness exclaimed. Maybe this world didn’t have any tradition of ritual suicide.

“That’s right. You tick off your master, you have to cut open your belly. If you’re defeated in battle, you have to cut open your belly. If you dared surrender in a duel? Better believe that’s a belly-cutting.”

“Does their cruelty know no bounds?! Besides, if you have to kill yourself when you surrender, what’s the point in surrendering?”

I guess Japanese culture didn’t make much sense to someone from another world.

“Samurai have a lot of pride, see? So much that they would even tie all their hair together on top of their heads to intimidate their enemies. And then they would collect enemy heads in battle as souvenirs.”

“What were they, headhunters?! And wouldn’t all this belly-cutting threaten to extinguish entire bloodlines?”

Well, yeah... There weren’t any samurai around today, were there?

“What else? Tell me about those ninjas you mentioned!” I guess it didn’t matter if we were on Earth or in another world entirely. All foreigners seemed to be fascinated by ninjas for some reason.

“Ninjas worked mostly at night. They knew how to meld silently with the shadows to make their attacks, that sort of thing. And I hear they liked to use poison.”

“So they’re nocturnal and specialize in sneak attacks. And poisonous, too. Scary...”

I got the impression she was misunderstanding something...

“Plus, in manga, they always have special attacks, like the Thunder God Technique or Flame Shield, or they can control lightning or breathe fire or whatever.”

“Wow, they even have magic and breath techniques... What other characteristics do they have?”

Yep, she was definitely getting the wrong idea.

“Well, *bunshin* is a famous one. It lets you create mirror images of yourself.”

“These creatures sound terrifying. So do the male and female ‘ninja’ monsters have identical physical characteristics...?”

You know what? I wasn’t even going to try to explain it to her.

...At least the awkwardness I had felt between us before we left was gone.

Or so I thought until one particular moment anyway...

“Good thing I found this perfect cave for us. Now we don’t have to go to all the trouble of pitching a tent. And if we park the carriage just inside the entrance, it’ll make a nice barricade. Maybe we won’t have to sleep with one eye open.”

“Sure.”

It was pitch-black outside, and we had come to the season when nights could be pretty chilly. Unfortunately, with just the two of us, starting a campfire probably wasn’t the best idea. There were monsters out there who weren’t afraid of fire. Some of them might actually be drawn to it.

“You said we have some dried meat and bread to eat, right? How about a quick dinner?”

“Sure.”

Darkness, who normally got only the highest-quality food to eat, actually seemed a little excited by the idea of cured meat and black bread. I understood, at least sort of. To me, nothing said *adventure* quite like dried meat and crunchy black bread. Heck, I was getting a little excited myself. But still...

“We can lay out some blankets on the cave floor and try to make it a little more comfortable. I’m sorry there’s no bath, but we can at least wipe ourselves down.”

“Sure.”

I kept repeating the same answer over and over. Darkness, holding a washbasin and a towel, said, “What’s going on with you? Are you even listening to me?” She looked at me suspiciously.

“I’m listening. You want me to make some water with Create Water, right? Don’t worry—it’s coming right up.”

“That’s not what I was talking about... I mean, I *do* want water, but...”

I extended a hand toward the washbasin and was about to use my spell when...

““Oh.””

...our fingers touched. Our horse, resting just inside the cave entrance, snuffled quietly. The night was full of the sounds of autumn insects. There was only faint starlight to aid our vision. It was like the whole world was conspiring to set the mood, whether we wanted it to or not...

"You know what, I don't need water after all. I splashed myself a bit before we left this morning!"

"I see. Yeah, you're right. I didn't even break a sweat riding in the carriage all day!"

It wasn't like I had exerted myself at all. We only needed to have a quick meal and go to sleep. We awkwardly brought out the food, I magically filled a couple of cups with water, and we each bit into some bread, still with only the stars for light...

""Ugh, it's hard."" We both groaned.

"What the heck. I heard black bread was tough, but how are you supposed to *eat* this?"

"Beats me... I'm too sheltered to know anything about the world, remember? You certainly never get tired of reminding me of it, so I assumed you knew what to do."

Well, I didn't. I didn't know how to eat this bread.

Fine. The black bread could wait. *At least it's not all we have...*

Darkness and I bit into the cured meat next.

""Ugh, salty!"" We both groaned again.

"Hey, this stuff is dangerous," I said. "If we actually managed to get it down, it'd probably spike our blood pressure and kill us. It's practically a salt lick."

"Don't you usually pair this with soup or something? It doesn't seem fit for consumption on its own..."

I put the meat back on my plate, next to the bread, and grabbed my bow and arrow instead.

"H-hey, Kazuma, where do you think you're going so late?"

"Don't underestimate me just because I'm a pampered NEET from Japan, the country of wonderful food. I'm not about to resort to eating this crap when I've started to level up my lifestyle! I have Second Sight and Sense Fo, not to mention my Deadeye skill. I shouldn't have any trouble taking down a rabbit or two. I'll be right back, so you just gather some branches or something. If we light a fire that only lasts long enough to cook rabbit meat, I don't think we'll attract any monsters."

"Gosh, you choose the strangest times to be manly..."

After a lovely meal of Horned Rabbit cooked on a skewer, we went right to bed, but...

...I couldn't sleep.

Maybe I was too excited about being on a trip, or maybe there was another reason. I'd been lying there for a while, but I hadn't managed to sleep a wink. Could it be I was just feeling paranoid because we were out in the wilderness? I activated my Sense Foe skill, but I didn't detect anything unusual. Anyway, if anything happened, our horse would make noise for sure. So maybe it was just the fact that I was sleeping on hard rock that made it so difficult to get any shut-eye...

Okay, so I knew the real reason I couldn't sleep. I was about to turn over for the umpteenth time when:

"Kazuma, are you awake...?" Darkness's voice was almost a whisper.

"Kazuma...?"

I could hardly hear her. If I'd been asleep, she would never have woken me up. Maybe I should have confessed that yeah, I was awake, but for some reason, I decided not to answer.

"So you managed to fall asleep..."

Which was what I continued to pretend to be doing. At length, there was a rustling of cloth and then a scrabble on the stone ground. I guess Darkness had climbed out from under her blankets and was going somewhere, though I didn't know where.

"It's all right. Kazuma's asleep...isn't he?" I felt her glance back to be sure. What did she think she was doing? So what if I was asleep?! Should I have taken that thing from Aqua? This was what I had feared most of all: having to spend a night in the wilderness with Darkness. The odds were probably better that there *would* be some kind of mistake than that there wouldn't!

Satisfied that I was asleep, Darkness took a deep breath...!

And then she left the cave without doing anything in particular to me. I heard some shuffling as she took something out of a bag.

A loud noise shattered the silence.

"Hey, what the hell?! It's the middle of the night; what do you think you're doing?!" I demanded.

"I didn't— It's this item's fault! I just wanted to use the bathroom, and then all of a sudden, it made this awful noise...!"

Darkness, looking close to tears, pointed at a box that was still

making a tremendous racket. It was about the size of a portable toilet like you might see at a construction site.

“Now I get it. I wondered what you could be up to in the middle of the night. You’ve been holding it in all day, haven’t you?”

“You make it sound so simple! Wait! You *were* awake!” As Darkness stood flummoxed in front of the toilet, I could see her blushing even in the starlight.

“You bet I was! I’m here all alone in the dark with a woman who’s thrown herself at me on multiple occasions. Anyone would expect something to happen.”

“Who would do something like that at a time like this?! Anyway, we have to deal with this! This toilet won’t stop screeching!”

It was frustrating that the toilet wouldn’t shut up, but we had a much bigger problem. “The sound attracted something this way! My Sense Foe skill is going nuts! Wake the horse up! I know it’s dark out, but we gotta get moving! Argh, I take back what I said about things being easier without Aqua! You’re just as bad!”

“I’m so sorry! I’m sorry for being such a worthless Crusader!”

5

So yeah, we didn’t get a whole lot of sleep that night. The next day around noon—we’d been traveling for a full day at that point—we came across a small town in what appeared to be a wasteland. This tiny village in this remote little corner also happened to be the location of the castle of the noble we had come to see.

Darkness stood at the gate of the castle and shouted, “Good people! My name is Lalatina Ford Dustiness! I’ve come because I have business with your master. Take me to him right away!”

The guards nodded at one another. “Our master never sees anyone without an appointment. Not even the scion of the Dustiness family, not even—”

“Please, he must!” Darkness interrupted.

“S-sorry, I’m afraid the rule’s ironclad...”

“I’m begging you! We don’t have any time!”

The guards found themselves overpowered by the suddenly very forceful Darkness. I guess that just showed how worried she was about those kids. Darkness was a very direct person. She could be stubborn, hardheaded, and single-minded, but it was all in the service of protecting people. I assumed she wouldn’t budge until she got her interview.

“Word of advice, guys. This lady isn’t going anywhere. She’ll probably stand here until the world ends if you don’t give her what

she wants.”

The gate guards looked perturbed by that. I figured we could at least get them to take a message for us. However, Darkness interjected. “No, I really am in a hurry! I don’t have time to stand around here!”

“...Hey, Darkness, we need to get our story straight. You can’t just bust in there.” Now I looked as troubled as the guards.

“If it’s that important, perhaps I can at least broach the subject with our master...,” one of the guards said, sensing this was no ordinary matter.

“Whoo-hoo, we did it, Darkness! One small step for us...”

“No, I need more than a small step! Please let me through!”

.....

“You’re the pushiest person I’ve ever met. I know you’re in a hurry, but you should have a little more faith in Aqua and Megumin. What’s our job? Just say it!” Maybe I finally got through to her, or maybe she remembered why we’d come here, because with tears burning in her eyes, Darkness turned to the guards and said...

“Please, *please* let me use your toilet...”

She was as loud and as assertive as a mosquito.

“You’re so embarrassing,” I grumbled.

“Look who’s talking. It was your shouting that brought everyone running and made it way worse than it had to be.”

This being an emergency situation, they had let us into the castle, and now we were going to get our audience with the master of the house.

“I *told* you to just do it in the woods. This is why I don’t like noblewomen. They get so prideful about the weirdest things. Are you even a real adventurer?”

“Okay, I’ll admit that sometimes adventurers have to use the bushes, but what does being a noblewoman have to do with this...? Ugh, for the first time in my life, there was a second where I thought I didn’t want to be an adventurer anymore...”

A very relieved Darkness and I were walking down a hallway in the castle.

“Our apologies for the wait, Lady Dustiness. The master is on his way now,” the guard who had served as our guide said before withdrawing. He had ushered us into a gorgeously appointed meeting room. It was decorated with perfectly chosen accessories—nothing too expensive, all tasteful. This guy clearly wasn’t some upstart nouveau riche.

“Hey, Darkness, when we were on the road, you said there was some kind of problem with this guy. What did you mean? Who are we

dealing with here? Is he a pervy freak like you?"

"I don't know what your fixation is with assuming nobles are all terrible people. The ones you've met so far have just been a little... unusual. But they've all been perfectly well respected by the populace... Er, uh, except me, maybe..." Darkness, unable to endure my stare any longer, coughed discreetly. "The ruler of this castle is known as Count Zeeleschilt. Some people call him the Cruel Count."

I was getting that sinking feeling already. I was remembering something from my world, a nobleman known as "the Impaler." Pretty sure he became the basis for every vampire story ever told. And now here we were in this world, facing some guy who had earned a very similar nickname. What were we going to do, have a friendly chat?

I was starting to think it had been a mistake, coming here with just the two of us. I mean, I had met Alderp; I knew how crazy the nobles could be around here. If we rubbed a local ruler the wrong way out in the middle of nowhere, who knew what would happen to us? We could "disappear," and no one would ever know we weren't eaten by monsters on the way.

As I sat there fretting, there came a knock on the door, and someone informed us that the Cruel Count himself was on the way.

This is bad. I wanna go home.

I stood up. "Hey, Darkness, maybe we should cut our losses, go get some more people, and—"

But then the door opened, and into the meeting room came...

"It has been far too long since I saw you last, Count Zeeleschilt. I must apologize for forcing myself on you so suddenly. But the most urgent matter has come up..."

"Lady Dustiness, well met. I've heard the story. It seems you need one of my nails to make some kind of medicine... And if you're asking for such a thing, then I presume you know what I truly am?"

The two nobles both sounded perfectly cordial, and they didn't waste any time getting down to business. But there was one thing I felt I had to say. I turned to Darkness. "Hey, Darkness. Are you sure this guy is one of this country's nobles? You said you never saw through him, even after all this time, right?"

"Kazuma, hush, I'm in the middle of an important conversation right now," Darkness said. "My apologies, Count Zeeleschilt. This man is my bodyguard and fellow adventurer, Kazuma Satou."

"A name with which I'm familiar. I'm given to understand he's the adventurer who has buried a great many of the Demon King's generals. I must say, he looks quite ordinary, but appearances can be deceiving..."

“All right, let’s cut to the chase,” I said to them. “Darkness, I smell a rat. Why’s he wearing a costume? Is this what nobility does around here? I’ve got so many sarcastic remarks about this guy, I don’t even know where to start.”

I pointed at the thing in front of us, which looked like a large, fuzzy penguin or something.

6

That’s right: He was wearing a costume. I couldn’t get over how closely he resembled a penguin. But maybe it was a mistake to say anything, because a profound silence settled over the room.

“Hey, don’t just clam up. What’s going on here? I’ve met some important nobles, like you and Claire. And now I’m supposed to believe a guy in an animal suit is a noble, too? How do you even know who’s inside?”

Darkness, uneasy, refused to make eye contact with me. “You want to know about the magical item the count is wearing? It’s no costume. It’s highly elastic, moisturizing, and retains heat well. It’s a brilliant invention from a foreign land... Anyway, in *our* country, if you’re good enough at what you do, you can be forgiven the occasional eccentricity or fetish. Those of us fighting the battle against the Demon King for the fate of humanity need the best people we can get.”

“Best or not, this guy’s as suspicious as they come. He could be a spy for the Demon King; you don’t know!”

When Count Costume heard that, he sat down on the sofa across from us with an unnecessarily elegant movement. “Calm yourself, I beseech you. You need not worry that I would ever join up with the Demon King’s army. On that point, I must beg your trust.”

“I’d like to meet the guy who would trust you, with the way you’re dressed! I’d get him a doctor!”

Count Costume only shrugged in amusement at my quip. It was a strikingly human gesture, and it kind of ticked me off.

“Hear me out, young man. If you know what I truly am, then may I presume you have at least a passing knowledge of demons? We’re symbiotes to humans. You’re important partners for us. I hope you will believe me.”

“This demon who told us about you—Vanir—he once said that humans were just the ingredients to a delicious meal.”

Count Costume froze at that. “...My, you’re an acquaintance of the great Vanir? Then I suppose there is no further need for obfuscation. Yes, we find you humans quite delectable. Your feelings of hatred and

negativity are like candy to us. If you understand what I'm saying, then hurry up and feed me some bad vibes, you insouciant little brat."

Damn, his attitude did a complete one-eighty!

"Count Zeeleschilt, please allow me to apologize profusely for this man's lack of tact. We've told no one in Axel about your identity, nor shall we, we promise. So please..."

The nasty costume made an amused sound at that. "I seem to recall you're a most pious follower of the Eris faith, Lady Dustiness. Can you then bring yourself to turn a blind eye to a demon like me? What's more, I know you to be a faithful servant of your nation. Can you let an unknown entity like myself go unchecked?"

He seemed to be testing her. Darkness glanced at me, then put on a very serious face. "In the past, I certainly would not have been able to do so... However, this man has helped me to see what it truly is that I must protect: not my pride as a member of the nobility but the defenseless members of my community. This man has shown me that I have to be willing and able to associate with all types, and I would like to think I've acquired some statesmanship. And also...Kazuma, I must thank you. Without you, I would have remained a hardheaded Crusader. The old me could never have left well enough alone after I learned of Count Zeeleschilt's true nature." She sounded increasingly shy. Then she turned back to Count Costume. "What do you think, Count Zeeleschilt? Does that answer meet with your approval?"

"...I say, I never intended to ask something so profound. I recall Crusaders being able to use a modicum of sacred magic. I was simply concerned that your Eris heart might stop you from using magic entirely if you deigned to overlook me..."

The silence returned.

"Um... I can't use magic, so it won't be a problem... I appreciate your concern, though..." Darkness seemed to shrink with embarrassment.

"That's all well and good, then, I suppose. Ahhh, embarrassment like this is a flavor Master Vanir is particularly fond of. It's not my personal taste, so you may feel free to collect yourself."

This last little jab from the demon caused Darkness to slump across the table, still red-faced.

Count Costume crossed his legs, again elegantly, and said in an imposing voice, "Now, let us get down to business. You want one of my nails, but unlike a greater demon such as Master Vanir, who leaves his true body in hell, those of us who manifest on this plane with our own bodies experience tremendous pain giving up even a piece of one of our nails."

It kind of annoyed me how the voice and terrible attitude were in

stark contrast to his bizarre appearance.

“About that... I’m afraid I don’t actually have a lot of money I can give you at the moment... But I promise on the Dustiness name, I *will* pay you back, even if it isn’t immediately! So please...”

Count Costume regarded the desperate Darkness silently. According to Vanir, demons were very particular about their contracts. An oral agreement like this would never fly. I decided to try to help Darkness out.

“I can put up some cash, if that’s what you need.”

“Wha—?” Darkness wheeled on me. What did she think I was here for? Wasn’t it to help out in negotiations like this?

“I may not look like much, but I’ve got serious assets. I’ve even been doing a little futures trading lately.”

“Wh-why, you... I take my eyes off you for a moment, and that’s what you get up to? I want you to unload those investments the moment we get back! The futures market eats amateurs for breakfast!”

She was very worried, but I just wiggled my fingers at her dismissively. “Listen, Darkness, I’ve got info that says an unusually large number of Snow Sprites is expected this year. That means it’s gonna be a cold one. All I did was figure out what crops are likely to be affected by a cold snap... Plus, I had professional help.”

“I never know what you’re going to do next, but I always know I’m not going to like it... And where did you meet a ‘professional’ in this line of work exactly?” Darkness was starting to gaze upon me with respect.

Count Costume, sitting across from us, didn’t so much as twitch at any of this. “No, thank you; I have quite enough money. Indeed, I presume you’re aware of my business acumen. I may not look like much, either, but I’m quite capable of squeezing every last drop of tax money out of my lands... If I may be so bold, I think in some sense that may make me even more useful to this nation than the Dustiness family, with its predilection for *clean* money.”

“Er... Ergh...”

Wow, for such a cute costume, this thing could play dirty. “Okay, then how about this? We use the power of the Dustiness family to push to have your territory enlarged.”

“Hey, Kazuma, you can’t offer him that!”

Count Costume watched me, shoulders shaking with amusement. “No, I’m quite satisfied with my territory as well. More land would bring me no benefit.”

Geez, what *did* he want?

“Hey, Darkness, don’t you outrank this guy? How about you start acting like it? Lean on him a little!” I muttered quietly.

“Don’t be stupid! I know I said I’d learned to hold my principles in

abeyance sometimes, but there's no way I can do that!"

"I can hear you, you know," Costume informed us. And here we'd been so careful to whisper. Damn... I guess that left us only one choice.

"All right, listen up. We're not asking you for the whole freaking kingdom or anything. We just want a bit of your fingernail. That's all we need, and then we go home happy, those kids go home happy, and *you* go home happy because nobody finds out what you really are. It's a win-win-win."

"I get the feeling I'm being threatened," Count Costume said, sounding intrigued and, for some reason, pleased about it.

Yeah, I was threatening him, all right.

"Heh-heh-heh! Let me tell you something, Mr. Zeeleschilt. In Axel, in our town, right? We have a certain Arch-priest of the Axis Church who goes completely insane when she sees a demon. 'Exorcise first, ask questions later,' that's her motto. Just imagine what she'll do if she finds out you turned us down...!"

"Kazuma, you're crossing the line! I'm not even sure which of you is the devil anymore!"

Now Costume laughed so hard, his entire body shook visibly. "Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, I would expect no less from acquaintances of the great Vanir! I never imagined someone would come here and genuinely attempt to blackmail a demon! This is most amusing! Well, as it happens, I do have something I want. It simply isn't a matter of money or mere material possessions."

Darkness looked at him in shock. "I know where this is going...! A body! You have your eye on my body! You want me to offer myself up as a sacrifice to save the lives of those children! Curse you, Count Zeeleschilt! Now I know why they call you the Cruel Count! You wear that adorable costume to throw everyone off, but you're twisted...!"

"N-no, that's not what I had in mind. Demons have no sexual desires, nor any interest in human bodies, so I'll thank you to disabuse yourself of your delusion!" For the first time, he seemed genuinely shaken. Then, however, he said eagerly, "You're adventurers, are you not? Then perhaps you would be interested in trying your hand at a little game we nobles play."

That sounded threatening. But he just looked so damn cute.

There was a fighting ring deep beneath the castle. As one of the servants showed us the way, Darkness explained to me what was going on. "It just so happens that some nobles have an unpleasant

habit of making monsters fight each other and betting on the outcome. You remember the prince of Elroad had a griffin, yes? Among some members of the nobility, keeping a powerful monster is a sign of status.”

Count Costume had a few beasties of his own, apparently. And as for his idea...

“He wants us to fight his monsters to prove our strength, huh...?”

Gee, this might be the most adventurer-ish thing I’d done since coming to this world. Fighting a monster in mortal combat to win an ingredient I needed for medicine to help some sick kids. I guess it sounded cool when you described it that way...

“The only question is whether you can do this alone, Darkness.” That’s right: He’d specified just one opponent, and he’d picked Darkness. “I don’t know what this guy has in mind, but he wants you to do this by yourself, so don’t let your guard down, okay? He did say that demons don’t have sex drives, but I’m not so sure about that. Breaking a female knight by ravishing the hell out of her... Isn’t that, like, the most demonic thing a person can do? Who knows what kind of monster he’s got waiting in there...”

Darkness trembled a little at that. Normally, I would assume it was from fear, but...

“You’re *looking forward* to this, aren’t you?”

“...A-am not.”

Despite my concern, Darkness, without a hint of fear, entered the ring. Located deep beneath the castle, it looked pretty much exactly like the Roman Colosseum back on Earth. It had a dirt floor and was big enough that several dozen people could have fought in it at once.

As for me, the servant led me to a seat right beside the costumed master of the house. He watched Darkness enter the arena, then announced excitedly, “Welcome to my coliseum! Normally, the nobles come to *watch* the monster fights...but today, Lady Dustiness, you will be the main attraction!”

He was really getting into this, making theatrical hand gestures and everything. Other than us, the only people in the audience were servants. There must have been some kind of magical item at work, because even though we were underground, the place was lit up like midday.

Darkness faced us from the center of the arena, and with verve to match the demon’s, she shouted back, “You’re on, Count Zeeleschilt! I serve the gods as a Crusader. No matter what you throw at me, I will not be defeated!” She was also blushing a little. Was it just my imagination, or were these two really excited about this?

“I would expect no less from the long-standing and honorable

Dustinesses! Excellent, most excellent! The shame, embarrassment, and inferiority you'll feel when your precious pride is broken! That's *my* favorite flavor of negative emotion! And now, my confident Crusader, show me what you can do!" With that eager shout, an iron grate on the far side of the arena began to open. Count Costume and I watched Darkness below, standing tall in the center of the field... "I thought we'd start small, Lady Dustiness. You may begin by dispatching this horde of goblins!"

Almost a dozen goblins poured out of the open tunnel!

8

It had been maybe ten minutes since Costume had started the proceedings.

"“This is horrible,”” he and I both mumbled.

"Hrrrgh—! To think I would be captured by the likes of goblins...! You filthy little beasts, I know you mean to pin me down...and then what?!"

Darkness had been swinging her sword tirelessly in the middle of the arena but hadn't managed to bring down even a single goblin. Instead, they had collectively dragged her to the ground.

"What in the world is this, Lady Dustiness...? You're among this country's most distinguished nobles, the victor of many a battle with generals of the Demon King. I know you cannot be bested by a simple mob of goblins... No, I see it now!" Count Costume was talking to himself and had apparently heard something he liked. "This is all part of the show! Yes, of course! If you were to use your true power, you would have wiped out these goblins in a single stroke. But you knew I could never enjoy myself that way, so you contrived to suffer at their hands..." Then he cocked his head, puzzled. He seemed to be having a whole conversation over there. "What's more, I detect no embarrassment or feelings of inferiority from you... I see, I see... You're choosing not to attack but to show me that you can endure the assault of any monster!" It sounded like he had a pretty serious misunderstanding going on, but just the same, he put this idea to Darkness in a somber voice.

Darkness, still on her knees, looked up at him with a grin, of all things. "It would not be fit for me to besmirch my blade with the blood of mere goblins. I do not wield this sword for the purpose of hurting your monsters, Count Zeeleschilt. Rather, I do it to protect this country!"

That sounded cool and all, but I knew she just couldn't hit the goblins. They were too fast.

“It seems goblins aren’t enough to bring out so much as the faintest bit of your power... My goblins, you may withdraw!” Maybe the costume resembled a monster to them, because they dutifully released Darkness and went back into the tunnel. “Consider this a warning, Lady Dustiness,” Costume said, looking pleased. His voice alone was enough to put on the pressure. “I am about to release another monster! The Crusader’s natural enemy. It is an endangered species, but it has been known as the Lady Knight Killer, the Princess Knight Killer, and has gone by various other nicknames throughout the ages. Now it is considered to be only a myth.”

“Wh-what?!” Darkness exclaimed, looking just a little excited.

“Yes, you’ve heard of it, I am sure! That monstrous enemy of women everywhere...”

“Wait! The enemy of women?! You don’t mean... Not a magically augmented Slime? Or a tentacle monster? No, you said it was an endangered species... You bastard! It can’t be!”

Darkness’s voice was getting higher and higher, and Costume raised his hand, looking happier and happier. “I see you’ve guessed what’s next! The mortal enemy of Crusaders like you, once spoken of in the same breath as goblins as a major monster!” A cage beside the arena clanked open. “Come forth, my pure-blooded orcs! Demonstrate why you are feared by women the world over!”

And there they were: male orcs. I’d thought they were already extinct.

Two of them came rushing out of the cage.

The orcs looked awfully wary of Darkness, red-faced and shaking. “I can’t believe this! I’d heard male orcs were extinct!” Darkness exclaimed with joy, and Costume laughed, pleased.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I’m going to enjoy this! The proud soul of an Eris-worshipping Crusader, humbled on the ground by a pair of sex-starved orcs! Here come the best bad vibes of all: pure humiliation!”

It was orcs versus a lady knight. Man! First a quest to get the ingredients for some medicine to help a little girl, and now this! It was like a fantasy-world greatest-hits collection! Why did I feel so excited when Darkness was about to be subjected to a terrible fate? I couldn’t allow them to actually violate her, but I guess I could let them have a little fun for a few minutes. I figured Darkness herself wouldn’t mind.

“Damn it all!” I shouted. “I desperately want to come help you, but if I interfere, everything you’ve endured will be for nothing! Stay strong, Darkness! Don’t let those orc bastards beat you!”

“Why do you look like you’ve got front-row seats to the show of the century?! Okay, so I admit I can’t have you helping me, but I’m

not so sure about the eager expression on your face, either!”

“Very good! Now, my orcs, attack!” Count Costume shouted, and the orcs exchanged glances at each other, and...

...curled up their piglike tails and slunk back into their cage.

“Hey, Darkness, what the hell? Did you do something to those orcs?! Have you ever, like, used all your money to buy an orc baby and tormented it?”

“Who would do *that*? I might be a pervert, but I’m not *that* bad! Why are these things so scared of me?!”

That was an excellent question.

“Yo, Count Costume, what’s the deal? You need to keep your orcs in line!”

“You have no right to speak to me that way! But I don’t understand... Why do my orcs look so afraid...?! ...Ah, I see, the blessing all Crusaders possess has terrified those evil creatures!”

When he said that, it all fell into place for me.

So that’s it.

I’d bet those orcs were traumatized as kids by the females around them...

“Fine, I see this is too much for you. Withdraw!” Costume said, and the orcs hightailed it out of there.

“What’s the matter, Count Zeeleschilt?! Weren’t you going to humiliate me? You’re hardly living up to your nickname, Cruel Count!”

“Grrr...!”

As Darkness mocked Count Costume, she looked incredibly disappointed, as if her wish hadn’t come true. I hoped she wasn’t forgetting what we’d come here for.

“Heh-heh-heh-kah-ha-ha-ha! You’ve wildly exceeded my expectations, Lady Dustiness! I see goblins and even orcs are no match for you. Instead, I myself shall be your opponent!”

Was he serious?!

“You’re gonna fight in *that* costume?” I exclaimed. “Come on—it’s too early to give up. You’ve got to have something nastier around! I mean, you have male orcs, for crying out loud! You must at least have a magically augmented Slime or a tentacle monster or something!”

“I concede I do have such things. But Lady Dustiness remained unfazed even in the face of two lusty male orcs. I don’t believe any of my other pets would intimidate her enough. After all, this entire time, I haven’t gotten even a whiff of terror or panic from the good lady!”

Oh, those monsters would work. On her, they would work better than anything. But Count Costume was already jumping down into the arena with an agility that belied his ridiculous appearance.

“Huh?!” Darkness exclaimed when the costumed figure suddenly

appeared in front of her.

“Now, show me your power, Lady Dustiness! And let me feast upon those delectable bad vibes when you are finally broken, humiliated, and left in the dust!”

And then the guy in the fancy costume spread his arms wide and lunged at Darkness!

9

“...I can't tell you how sorry I am.”

“No kidding.”

We had left Count Zeeleschilt's castle, and now Darkness, deeply disappointed, was guiding our carriage around the little town as we looked for someplace to stay. “I never imagined you'd be such a good fit for a demon like that,” I said from beside her on the driver's bench.

“.....I'm so sorry.”

“No kidding.”

Zeeleschilt, the “Cruel Count.”

When he'd gone into battle with Darkness, he'd sure lived up to his name.

“...I can't believe you would forget yourself so completely and indulge in 'play' like *that*...”

“Gods, you make it sound so sordid! It was the first time I'd ever experienced anything like that, okay? I never thought something like *that* would come flying out of something that looked so cute...”

So the demon had gone after Darkness himself. He'd undone the clasp on his back, and what emerged was...

“Hey, I got a great view of the whole thing, so it's fine by me...”

“I want you to forget about that! Arrrrgh... First Vanir, now Count Zeeleschilt. I'm just so bad with demons!”

For the sake of Darkness's honor, I won't go into detail regarding exactly what happened, but...

“I guess my one saving grace is that demons have no sex drive...,” she muttered.

“And after you said you loved me...”

Darkness couldn't quite meet my critical gaze.

I didn't know what we'd do next, though. I guess that costumed demon had been trying to terrify Darkness, but this sicko couldn't get enough. Count Costume never got the negative emotions he was craving and ended up storming off. I wasn't sure we'd get another crack at negotiating after this...

I was just starting to really worry when a very familiar Thief

appeared in front of our carriage.

“Hey, Darkness. Look who it is.”

“...I’m so sorry... Huh? Is that Chris? What’s she doing here?”

The silver-haired figure waving down our carriage was my Thief-Chief, Chris. I didn’t know what she was doing here, but at least part of it became clear soon enough. As Chris rushed over to our carriage, she turned to the still-despondent Darkness and said:

“Hey, buddy! I’m here to help you!”

And she grinned wide.

Chapter 6

Eris's Blessing for This Crusader!

1

"Check it out, Lowly Assistant! Look at that gigantic inn! Let's stay there tonight."

Chris had seemed oddly excitable ever since she'd linked up with us.

"You have the money to stay in a place like that, Chief? You strike me as the type who squanders her cut of the loot the moment a job is done."

Chris and I were sitting behind Darkness, who was still driving, and scanning the town for a place to stay for the night.

"Of course I don't have any money. I gave most of what I did have to the Eris Church, and I drank the rest."

"Bad Chief. So what are you going to do about tonight?" I asked, but Chris only smiled.

"Come on, Lowly Assistant—we're pretty good friends, right? We spent all night running around town together. Just like best buddies, am I right? So we've gotta stay together, too!"

Pay for my room, huh? Very subtle.

I didn't particularly mind, but before I could answer, Darkness looked back and said, "I'll cover Chris's portion. She did come all the way from Axel to help me... Sounds like you're just as faithful to the Eris Church as ever, Chris, and I appreciate that, but don't you think you should set aside a *little* something for the future?"

"Yay! Thanks, Darkness! The future? Eh, I'll get there." She hugged Darkness around the neck.

"‘Thanks, Darkness,’ indeed. I worry about you, you know. I have a home of my own, on top of Kazuma's mansion and his considerable resources. He's taking care of Aqua and Megumin, too. But you, Chris, where do you spend your time? You don't seem to live anywhere, and

you have zero savings. I guess that's pretty typical with adventurers, but you should think about coming to live at our place one of these days..."

Chris didn't quite meet Darkness's eyes. "N-nah. I appreciate it, Darkness, but I'm fine, really! I have places to crash. I'll get by."

"How will you get by? That's what I'm asking! You haven't turned to crime again, have you? If I catch you, even I won't be able to look the other way. I know how I used to be, but I'm starting to learn to use my authority to get what I want. Don't make me have to pull strings for you."

"What happened to you, Darkness?! How did my sweet, hardheaded Darkness...? This must be *your* fault! You've led Darkness down the wrong path! Give her back! Give me back my dense, innocent, gullible sweetie pie!"

"Don't try to pin this on me, Chief. She's been a little funny all her life."

As we argued by the town gate, a bell tolled twilight.

"All right, Chief. Let's do a quick inspection. Anyway, when you think about it, we don't really need anywhere to stay. We've got a kid dependent on some medicine, so once the job's done, we'll be leaving town in a hurry." Considering Chris was here, I knew what I had to do. Naturally...

"Ugh, I'm going to be an accessory to a crime... With my own hands..." Darkness, who had been in a despairing mood for some time now, was holding her head and muttering.

Chris patted Darkness on the shoulder. "It's okay, Darkness. This is to help that little girl, right? We don't have a choice. I feel bad for Zeeleschilt or whatever his name is, but we need to get the ingredients for that medicine!"

Why had she come here? "*No special reason*," that was what she'd claimed. But I knew. Darkness had gone to pray at the Eris Church before we left on our trip. And that meant...

"You really do look after your own, don't you, Chief?"

"Huh...? I'm sure I don't know what you mean, but thanks, I think."

How, you ask, could Chris be quite so calm when we were just about to try to break into a demon's personal castle? Easy: We hadn't told her about Count Costume's true identity. Darkness said Chris lost her head when she saw a demon or an undead and went nuts trying to attack them, so I was to keep my mouth shut if at all possible. As for me, knowing Chris's true identity as I did, I was worried that if she knew, she wouldn't stop at stealing knickknacks. She would want to deal with that freak in the costume, too. So sure, I'd keep my mouth

shut.

“Listen, Chief, stop staring. You’re not some tourist from the countryside. That silver hair of yours could get you in a lot of trouble.”

Chris normally worked alone. Maybe she was excited—or nervous—to finally be in a party again, because from the moment we got inside, she could hardly stay still, looking at everything in sight and fidgeting around.

“I keep wondering,” Darkness said to Chris, “since when did the two of you get so close? I look away for a moment, and suddenly you’re thick as thieves. From my recollection, you hardly even know each other...”

Chris, smirking, poked a finger at her and replied, “What’s the matter, Darkness, worried about what’s going on between my lowly assistant and me? Come to think of it, you haven’t told me how far you and he have gone. Spill the beans, and I *might* see my way to answering your question, eh?”

What a thing to say! Darkness glanced at me, then turned away again. Chris, totally observing this, murmured to me, “Saaay, Lowly Assistant, Darkness is acting a little funny. What’d you do to her?” They really were close friends: Chris had picked up on the awkwardness between us right away.



"I didn't do anything. In fact, that's the whole reason things are so weird. Okay, short version: Darkness fessed up to me about her feelings, but I'm in a good place with Megumin right now, so I sorta turned her down..."

"Whaaaaat?! You rejected *Darkness*?!"

Darkness, holding the reins up front, flinched visibly.

"Keep it down, Chief! I told you things were weird! Why would you shout about it?!"

"But she—! But you—!"

There was no further obvious reaction from Darkness up on the driver's bench, but I could see the tips of her ears flushing a faint red.

See?! This is obviously bugging her!

"So you're dating Megumin, then, Lowly Assistant?" Chris asked eagerly, strangely excited about this.

"Not really. Our current status is 'more than friends but less than lovers.'"

"Gee, that's pretty anticlimactic. So how far did you go with Megumin? Didja kiss her?"

Some goddess! What was she doing, pressing me for details on my love life? I'd seen Darkness's ears twitching, even though she didn't move anything else. I guess she was curious about our hushed conversation.

"I still haven't done anything with Megumin..."

Okay, so we'd shared a bath, held hands, and cuddled up under the covers, but still.

"That's funny. I always took you for a real no-qualms, grab-opportunity-with-both-hands kind of guy."

Gee, sorry I'm not, you know, grabbing anything. I still didn't have it in me to take responsibility for going all the way.

"Huh, so that means you still have a chance with Darkness."

"Nah, I'm loyal. I know you're just trying to egg me on, but still..."

Yeah, it had hurt when I had to turn Darkness down. I'd honestly thought I was going to cry.

...Okay, so I know it wasn't really my place to speak, seeing how excited I got after that. Chris, though, was grinning again. "You seem like the responsible type, surprisingly. And I'll bet you can't leave a good thing alone, can you? If you crossed a certain line, you'd take responsibility, wouldn't you? So, hey, say Darkness gives you another kiss. Not on the cheek this time but right where it belongs...!" She kept jabbing me in the ribs with her elbow as she spoke.

"Oh, Darkness and I have crossed *that* line already."

"Whoa, hang on! What did you say?! I thought it was *Megumin*

you were getting into that sort of thing with! So how can you be like that with Darkness when you haven't even done anything with Megumin?! You're not making any sense!"

I ignored the flustered Chris. "Hey, Darkness, how about you park the carriage in that abandoned lot over there? There aren't that many people coming by. No one'll see it."

"Right, good idea."

"Hey, don't try to weasel out of this! Tell me! Hey, Darkness, we're best buddies, right? Tell me how this whole kiss thing happened!"

"Kazuma, what the hell have you been saying to her? Don't you start asking me about that, Chris!"

Darkness went beet red again.

2

Once we'd parked the carriage, Chris slammed Darkness with questions. Then Darkness took her turn, interrogating Chris as to where she usually was and what she spent her time doing. All of which cost us time...

And that brought us to the present. We were standing in front of Count Zeeleschilt's castle once again, this time under the cover of night. Chris and I had broken into enough buildings by now that I was starting to become something of an expert on infiltration. And so I stood, considering the best way to come at this castle...

As I mulled it over, Darkness, who had a mask around her face just like Chris, tugged on my sleeve. "Why do you look so worried, Kazuma? We've come this far; we can't back out now. Those children are suffering even as we speak... My mind is made up. If we're going to do this, let's get going." She sounded a little uneasy herself.

She'd taken off her heavy armor. The tight black outfit underneath was surprisingly sexy, not to mention a lot more burglar-ish than what Chris and I were wearing.

"Listen, Darkness, we're pros. And this sort of thing isn't your specialty. So leave this to us and do what we tell you," I said.

"He's right, Darkness. I'll bet you've never done anything like this in your sheltered life, have you? It's all right—just let me handle everything. I mean, Lowly Assistant and I have even broken into the royal castle."

In spite of our assurances, Darkness looked very concerned. "Yes, you got in, but they chased you right back out." Ouch, that stung.

Chris pointed at me and said, "That's because Lowly Assistant—!"

"Chief, I don't think this is the time to be digging up the past.

Thief of those poor kids..."

"That's true, but I don't want to hear it from you!"

I ignored the jabbering Chris, using my Second Sight skill to try to find a way in. The castle was surrounded by towering walls, the front gate was shut tight, and I didn't see anything resembling a back door. There was no way we were going to be able to tunnel under the walls, so that left us only one option...

"You bring any rope, Chief?"

"Naturally. A true Thief never goes anywhere without some rope handy."

Chris and I nodded at each other, and each produced a length of rope seemingly out of thin air.

"You guys just walk around with that? No, I'm sure you brought it along because we were planning on infiltration..."

"That's where you're wrong, Darkness. Any Thief worth a damn has some rope on them at all times," Chris replied. Darkness froze.

"Remember, Chief, she's a pampered young lady. She doesn't understand our ways..."

"Oh yeah. Sorry, Darkness."

Darkness didn't quite seem ready to accept what we were saying, but she went along with us anyway. There was a guard in front of the castle gate, but I doubted he could see everywhere all along the walls. We went around one side, then flung ropes with grappling hooks up to the top of the walls. I tugged on mine to make sure it was secure.

Darkness watched us work with real appreciation. "You're both good at this," she said as Chris and I grabbed our ropes and prepared for a nice, easy...

"Damn, the rope's slipping! This is tough!"

"I don't have the strength to climb this, Lowly Assistant!"

"Chief, maybe we can tie some knots in the rope. That should make it a little easier to get up."

Darkness watched us flail, then suggested hesitantly, "Hey, you two, I think I can climb the rope with my strength. How about you let me go first? Then I can pull you up."

"Amateurs should keep their amateur ideas to themselves, Darkness," I said.

"He's right," Chris added. "If you let your attention lapse for even a second, it could spell your demise. You're still an inexperienced beginner. Watch before you attempt. Just leave it to me, remember?"

"R-right, sorry. I didn't mean to butt in."

At least she was finally getting into it. Considering her sudden burst of motivation, we decided to have Darkness go first after all. She managed to scramble up the rope on strength alone, then pulled us each up. Then we carefully made our way onto the castle grounds.

“Okay, Darkness. You just follow us, all right?”

“The chief and I have the Ambush skill, but you don’t, obviously. Don’t let go of my hand, okay?”

“G-got it!” Darkness said and grabbed my hand.

“Okay, I know more about this than you do, so for tonight, I want you to call me Boss.”

“Boss.”

“That’s the stuff.”

“C’mon, Lowly Assistant! We don’t have time for your silly games,” said Chris when I had forced Darkness to practice her “Boss” one too many times. “Let’s get going!”

“I remember how many times you made *me* say your name when you designated me as your subordinate.”

“That was then; this is now. Point is, Lowly Assistant, we have to hurry.”

I got myself together and explained to our crew’s newest member, Darkness: “Listen up, newbie. At this time of day, the ruler of the castle is most likely to be on the top floor. Important people and big bosses always like high places. It’s just the way they are.”

Chris nodded in agreement at my brilliant deduction.

However, our newbie had the gall to contradict me. “Actually, I’ve been here a few times, and I seem to remember Count Zeeleschilt likes to live down with his monsters in the arena. Maybe we should go there first.”

“Okay, Darkness, we were giving you a general overview about these things. Obviously, we both knew where the big bad was. We have the Sense Foe skill, after all.”

Chris nodded again.

“O-oh yeah, sorry. Guess I should have kept my mouth shut,” Darkness said.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. You’re new to this; no one blames you. Besides, sometimes new blood means new ideas: stuff only a newbie would think of. If something’s bugging you, speak up. Okay, let’s hit the basement. Oh, but before that...”

In front of us was a door leading into the castle. Even though there’d been a guard at the gate, I didn’t see one in front of this door or anywhere else around. Maybe just because we were out in the sticks, where you didn’t expect to need a lot of guards. Or maybe because the ruler of the castle was a devil who could take care of himself...

“It’s my time to shine,” Chris said confidently. “My Lockpick skill will bust this thing wide open.” She stepped forward, and... “Lowly Assistant, this is bad! This door doesn’t have a keyhole!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding, Chief! You think maybe we need a

password or a magic spell to open this thing?"

We held a quiet conference about the unexpected obstacle. But that was when our newest member stepped up.

"Erm, I think it works like this..."

Darkness walked past us and lifted up the door.

"Lots of old castles have lift doors like this. They're pretty heavy, so they help prevent break-ins because you need someone else to lift them up for you... U-um, what's wrong, you two?"

Chris and I were staring at her wordlessly.

"Hey, Darkness, just what were you planning to do if there was a trap in there? It's thanks to my good Luck that there wasn't, but..."

"He's right, Darkness—you can't open things carelessly in a place like this. Thankfully, my Luck is some of the best in Axel, so there was no trap, but still."

"S-sorry about that. I admit it was pretty careless of me."

How nice of her to apologize.

"Ahhh, don't worry about it. Like I said, you're new to this. Just try to use your head a little more."

"Yeah, you might be new, but we're going to let you take point today, Darkness. Don't worry—we veterans will be close behind to support you."

"R-really? Well, don't mind if I do, then..." Looking ever so slightly puzzled, Darkness started forward. After that, and thanks to those prior visits she'd apparently made to this castle, Darkness was able to lead us easily through the hallways with minimal light.

"Say, Lowly Assistant, do you get the feeling *we're* the liabilities here?"

"Our time will come, Chief. Darkness talks a good game, but sometimes she chickens out at the last minute. Us pros know how to follow through."

Though to be fair, *following* was about all we'd been doing all night.

That's when it happened—Chris and I came to a halt at the exact same moment. We both felt the presence of monsters ahead.

Come to think of it, that costumed freak had been able to order his monsters around. He had human guards outside the castle, but it looked like he left the inside of the building to his little pets.

"Hey, Darkness. There's something watching the stairs to the basement up ahead. I know you can't hit the broadside of a barn with your attacks. Let the chief or me handle this. You keep an eye out and make sure no one else shows up."

"Got it! I can't wait to see what you can really do!" Darkness was

practically bubbling with excitement. As for Chris and me, we gave each other a thumbs-up, then activated our Ambush skills and started creeping toward the aura. Standing there was...

“Lowly Assistant, Lowly Assistant, it’s an orc! A male orc! I thought they were an endangered species! Huh, you think it’s okay for us to take this one out?”

A couple of orc dudes (the ones who had been afraid of a simple human female, probably due to trauma at the hands of lady orcs early in their lives) were standing there.

“Good point. I’d rather leave my orc bros in one piece if I can.”

“Uh, what do you mean by ‘orc bros’? ...Never mind—I understand. I’ll take the lead here. They can’t deal with women, right? I’ll slap Bind on them, Lowly Assistant. You just go keep watch with Darkness.” She took a Bind rope from her hip...



But the moment she showed herself to the orcs, they grabbed her.

“Lowly Assistant! Lowly Assistant, help me!”

The orcs promptly tore off Chris’s clothes.

“This isn’t what you told me, Lowly Assistant! I thought these orcs were supposed to be afraid of women! H-hey, stop! Lowly Assistant! Darkness! They’re tearing everything off!”

Chris was reduced to hot pants and an undershirt after the orcs ripped off her equipment. That’s when Darkness and I charged in!

“U-urgh... Thanks, that was an awful close one...” Chris was crouched in her underwear, sniveling, while the orcs I’d trapped with my Bind flopped around on the floor.

“Y’know, the moment those guys saw Darkness, they got terrified, so I think they’re still perfectly scared of girls. It just means they thought you were a guy, Chris, the way you look...”

“Shhh! Kazuma, that’s enough! Come on, Chris—it’s all right now. Put your clothes back on,” Darkness said, gathering up Chris’s gear.

“Sniiiff... Darkness, I’m not sure I can ever get married now...”

“It’s okay, Chris. It doesn’t count if it was monsters who did it.” I couldn’t help noticing Darkness glance longingly at the orcs as she spoke.

“Whatever, now we can head downstairs thanks to your noble self-sacrifice, Chief. So come on! Let’s get moving!”

3

Even though it was the middle of the night, the basement was brighter than it had been that afternoon, and we could sense monsters all over.

“Say, Lowly Assistant, is it just me, or is there something weird about this castle? I know you guys mentioned a noble who keeps monsters for pets, but I don’t think most orcs would let themselves be domesticated and used for guard duty. And the monsters I’m detecting don’t seem to be locked up in cages or anything...”

That was because this entire castle was controlled by a demon.

“There’s a good reason for that, but I can’t tell you right now. Let’s just say our best bet is to avoid any fighting.”

If Count Costume was like every other major boss, he would be in the innermost chamber. I looked at Darkness to make sure she’d

understood and received a nod, so we started forward quietly.

"I know you have Sense Foe to find the monsters and Ambush to avoid them, but I assumed we'd end up in at least *one* skirmish," Darkness murmured, surprised.

"Yeah, it's going great right now. How do you like what the chief and I can do together, Darkness?"

"Good point, Lowly Assistant. With our combined Luck, nothing can touch us."

.....

"And yet, somehow you struggled to get up the walls, struggled to get through the door, struggled to defeat those orcs..."

"Quiet, Darkness. Everyone makes mistakes. I know you, for example, spent all night worrying that the reason Sylphina got sick was because you asked her to come to Axel and she ended up catching something on the road. And you were extra upset because then the illness spread to all the other kids. So yeah, nobody's perfect. The point is, don't spend all your time moping about it. Bounce back like we do."

"Great advice, Lowly Assistant! He's right, Darkness. So what if you screwed up a little? If it gets you something big in the end, it all works out. You can't just go around moping about it."

Darkness's eyes welled up with tears at our encouragement. "You guys... You're right. I've got to get out of my own head and focus on obtaining the ingredients for that medicine..."

.....

"...Hey, just a second. Yes, I have messed up in my life, and I've been depressed, but I'm not sure what any of that has to do with this exactly..."

"Hush, Darkness. This passage only goes one way. Count Costume's room has gotta be at the end of it, right?"

"Yeah, the room down there definitely gives off a boss-chamber vibe," Chris added. "That's my intuition as a veteran thief..."

"You're right. Count Zeeleschilt's bedchamber is this way for sure, but... Hey, you two, I can't shake the feeling that you're just throwing me off the scent..."

Chris and I ignored Darkness (I didn't know what she was muttering about anyway) and tried to make ourselves as invisible as possible. Then we went ahead...

The design of the passageway seemed cruel itself, somehow, and at the end was a pitch-black door that just *looked* sturdy and heavy. Darkness and I nodded at each other, and then I pressed my ear quietly against the door.

As I stood there listening, Chris tugged on my sleeve. "Lowly Assistant, are you sure the owner of this castle is an ordinary nasty

noble? Everything about this place—the decoration on the door, the construction of this hallway—makes me feel more like a general of the Demon King would live here than anyone else...” Chris still didn’t know the truth about who Count Zeeleschilt was, but she was managing a pretty good guess.

“You’re right; he’s not exactly a bad noble. But listen, the point is, if we don’t get out of here with a certain thing this guy has, those kids’ lives will be in danger. That much is for sure.”

“Kazuma is right, Chris. Our objective is to get out of here with the ingredient for that medicine. Just focus on that...okay? Please do me a favor and *don’t* lose your head, all right?”

“Hey, what’s with you guys? Why are you so worried I’ll get upset? What’s on the other side of that door?” She was looking more and more distraught. Darkness and I nodded at each other again and...

...rushed the door and burst into the room beyond!

Our adversary was a demon. I could almost guarantee he wasn’t asleep, not even at this hour. The best plan, then, was to surprise him and make our move before he recovered. Maybe some devilish power told him when something funny was going on in his castle, though, because Count Costume was standing there proudly in the middle of the room, arms crossed.

“Well met, my dear intruders! You must understand, of course, where we are. Heh-heh. O mysterious intruders whom I have never met before...”

This was somewhat unexpected. I had assumed he would at least take off the costume while he was relaxing in his own room, but maybe I’d underestimated him. Now we would have to get the suit off him before we could grab his fingernail. And besides, from the way he was talking...

“Dammit, he knows exactly who we are!”

Chris, staring at the costume, exclaimed, “Lowly Assistant, what’s going on?! Is this what you meant about not losing my head? That’s impossible—you *know* I can’t attack anything this cute!”

No, that wasn’t what I meant!

“Don’t let your guard down, Chris! He might look lovable, but there’s something awful under that suit! Our objective is to get a piece of his nail! We can use it to make a medicine to treat cholera!”

Chris froze at that. “A piece of a nail to make a medicine to treat cholera...” She blanched. It was almost as if she recognized that description.

“I’ve got it, Chris!” Darkness said, stepping in front of us. “You pin

Count Zeeleschilt in place with Bind! I can absorb any attack he can dish out...!”

“Like the true shield you are, intruder! I admire your passion! But let us see how much a mere human can endure when I get truly serious...!” Count Costume spread his arms wide, sounding awfully confident. But just as he made the dramatic gesture—

Chris rushed past me and Darkness, racing up beside Count Costume...

...where she raised her dagger in both hands and drove it in up to the hilt.

“Eeeeyowch!” Count Costume howled. “H-hold on—!” He managed to throw off Chris, who was trying to climb on top of him, then pulled the dagger from his side and threw it away. Instead of blood, some kind of black miasma drifted out from the tear in the side of the costume with a nasty hissing sound.

“H-hey, Chris, what do you think you’re doing? Bind would have been plenty! We just need the tip of his fingernail! We don’t have to kill him! In fact, when you kill a demon, he goes back to hell, which means his body disappears! And then we won’t have any nails at all!”

I remembered Aqua saying once that Eris was even more merciless toward the undead and devils than Aqua herself was. Chris made it to her feet, albeit unsteadily. I grabbed her arms to keep her from taking another stab.

“Argh! What are you doing, Lowly Assistant?!”

“You know what I’m doing! You’re forgetting why we’re here! We need his nail!”

That seemed to snap her out of it. “You’re right! If I’m going to take him down, I have to do it after we have the nail!”

Okay, so maybe she hadn’t quite snapped out of it. We didn’t need to “take him down”! But that didn’t seem to matter to Chris. She just turned calm eyes on Count Costume.

“Who brought this crazy kid along?” he demanded. “Who is he?”

“I’m a girl!” Chris shot back, and Count Costume trembled.

“I couldn’t care less what you are! Was that a magic dagger you just stabbed me with? Or a cursed item, perhaps? The mere touch of it tingles! I detect the sour stench of demon-slaying intent!”

“It’d be more flattering if you’d guessed it was blessed with holy prayers! It’s a special, extra-powerful dagger I made specifically to use against demons!” Chris grabbed the dagger off the floor and prepared to attack again.

“I don’t know why, you mad child, but I sense a great chill from you!” Count Costume spun around to display the fasteners on his back.

“Watch out!” Darkness cried. “He’s trying to take off the costume!” She pressed the fasteners down as hard as she could. She looked like a girl hugging her favorite toy, but they definitely weren’t messing around.

“I’ll slow him down with Bind, Chief! You try to cut off his wings!” Knowing who and what this creature was, I knew what bad news it would be if he got out of his costume. I readied my special binding wire.

“Hit us both together, Kazuma! I don’t care!” Darkness cried.

I obliged. “*Bind!*”

“Hrk! Th-these stupid...!” Count Costume, now bound together with Darkness, was trying to reach his stubby arms back to the fasteners. But then:

“Argh...! Agh...!” Darkness made a sound of distress, like she was straining against something. I saw something emerging, not from the fasteners but from the wound Chris had made: a black tentacle, feeling its way out. It left viscous slime on Darkness’s back, and when it touched her tights, I heard a sizzling sound and saw smoke. I reached for my hip, drew my beloved sword (which I had rarely used since I bought it), and started slicing. I severed the tentacle on Darkness’s back; it fell to the floor, where it flopped around.

“This is one disgusting demon, Lowly Assistant!”

“Then you better hope you never see his true form! It’s really stomach-turning!” Darkness said.

I had a different concern: What part of him was his fingernail? There didn’t seem to be anything that fit the description on the flopping tentacle.

“Darkness, hold on just a little longer! I’m going for his nail...!” Chris, dagger in hand, stabbed Count Costume in his stubby winglets!

“Eeeeyeeowchhhh! Will you *stop* stabbing me with that thing?!”

Chris picked up the winglet, which produced another groping tentacle like the one from his side. But...

“Listen up. Fighting tentacle monsters has been the duty of Crusaders from time immemorial!” Darkness, still stuck to Count Costume, shoved her hand into the wound in his side. There was more sizzling from inside the suit.

Chris, meanwhile, peered into the winglet she’d chopped off... “Darkness, I found it! A demon’s fingernail! How long will it take for your Bind to wear off, Lowly Assistant?!”

She was awfully excited, but I said, “I, uh, poured all my strength into it, so I think it’ll be a while...”

“Darkness, I’m going to use my dagger to cut that wire off you!”

Then she promptly tossed the winglet to me, raised her dagger, and went for the wire.

“Um, I’m real sorry,” I said, “but that wire’s made of mithril, so...”

“Oh, for the *love* of—!” Chris looked like she might cry.

Meanwhile, that sizzling sound kept going, but Darkness had started to smile. “I’m going to be fine, Chris. What matters is that you and Kazuma take that nail and get out of here.” How unlike her. “Heh, the count here knows who I am. He might torment me a little bit, but he would never go so far as to kill me. Now hurry up...!” Darkness was dripping sweat.

Chris, still tearful, held up her weapon. “If I stab the crap out of him with this dagger—!”

“Then all the wounds will produce more tentacles! Chief, do what she says and get back to the carriage! There’s something I want to try!” I took something out of my bag. Something Aqua had given me when she found out this guy was friends with Vanir.

“Lowly Assistant! Darkness! Just buy me a little more time! I’ll be right back, I promise!” Chris said and raced out of the room—!

“Darkness, take your hand out of one of the wounds! We’re gonna pour Aqua’s ‘juice’ right in there!”

“A-all right...! But then you have to get going! Even I can’t hold out forever against such a powerful tentacle monster...!”

“Hey, stop that! What even is that stuff? It hurts! It’s burning me!”

Chris had left, and now it was only Darkness, grinning despite the extreme circumstances, and me, pouring the “Aqua water” into Costume’s side...

“Show us what you’ve got, Darkness! It’s a contest of stamina! You versus him!”

“I’m on it! All right, Count Zeeleschilt, I might have missed my chance this afternoon, but now you’ll see what I’m really made of!”

“Wh-why are you *happy* about this, girl?! This is bizarre! It makes no sense! There’s something very wrong with you—!”

4

Back in Axel, we made a beeline for the orphanage.

“My, ahem, senior is at the orphanage, right, Lowly Assistant? I realized I have some...some business I need to take care of...”

Ah, yes. Having Aqua around could make things tricky. Then again, I wouldn’t expect that jelly-brained goddess to notice Chris’s true identity...

“Okay, sure, I’ll let everyone know. Thanks for your help, Chief.”

“Yeah, sure. See you. Keep an eye on this girl for me, will you? Make sure she doesn’t run herself ragged.” Chris patted Darkness fondly on the head as she snoozed in the carriage. “I hope... I hope one day I’ll be able to tell her who I really am, too...”

She smiled, just a little, and then she was gone.

I’d poured “Aqua juice” into the costume for as long as I could while Darkness kept him busy, but eventually she lost consciousness, and I was occupied trying to tear her away from Count Costume somehow...

And that was when Lady Eris had shown up and turned Count Costume into a divine punching bag.

Maybe that doesn’t make a lot of sense, but to be honest, it didn’t make a lot of sense to me, either. One thing I can say, though: An angry Eris is a scary thing. Count Zeeleschilt had been hell-bent on emerging from his costume, but one look at Eris and he was desperate to stay inside it. Watching her try to tear him out of there was a sight to behold.

She seemed awfully pleased with herself, having reduced his remaining lives by so many, but I dunno. Other than being a devil, it didn’t seem like that costume had done much harm to anybody, so I was just as glad she hadn’t totally destroyed him. Then Lady Eris, back in Chris’s body, and I had loaded Darkness into the carriage and headed home...

Hefting Darkness on my back, I pushed open the door of the orphanage and...!

“We’ve got the thing for the medicine! Aqua, look after Darkness for me! I just hope Sylphina’s okay...”

Who should I see standing there but...

“Welcome home, Mama...!”

Well, goodness. There was Sylphina, grinning widely.

“Hey.”

What the heck was going on here? Why did this kid look like she could take on the world? Suddenly...

“Wah—wah—waaaahhh...!”

...Darkness started wailing and weeping on my back. I guess she’d woken up without my realizing it and laid eyes on Sylphina. She scrambled down off my back and embraced the girl.

“Looks like Darkness is pretty happy about this. That’s fine, I

guess..." Aqua was lying in the center of the room, for some reason, surrounded by what seemed to be offerings. "Oh, you're back! Look! Just look at these energetic, happy children!"

I still wanted to know what had happened. Actually, I wanted to know a few other things, too: like why Vanir was rocking some of the kids on his back, why Wiz was lying on the floor half-transparent, why Megumin was slumped motionless on a table, exhausted...

"Ah, welcome home," Megumin said from her table, barely raising her head to see us.

"Yeah, we're home, and we got the stuff somehow. But what the hell is all this?"

"Well... Aqua got so excited when she started helping the kids that she took up residence here and just kept chanting healing magic with all her strength... I guess the power of the healing spell was stronger than the illness, because everyone has grown surprisingly sprightly. As you can see..."

So why did we go through all that chaos, then?

I was feeling pretty let down, but Vanir, carting a kid around in a sling on his back and shaking some sort of rattle, said, "It seems you collected the necessary ingredients. Without this live-in lady here, I must say half the children in the orphanage might well have died. And the girl clinging to our well-muscled friend, though she may look well, is yet terribly ill inside, so it would be best to make that special medicine as quickly as possible. Had Our Lady of Many Offerings flagged in her interest for a moment, the situation would have been dire... Come now, shopkeeper! It's your time to shine!"

Inspired by Vanir's gruesome warnings, I took out Count Costume's fingernail as quickly as I could and passed it to Megumin.

"Excellent work, Darkness and Kazuma. Just leave the rest to the greatest genius of the Crimson Magic Clan. I stayed up all night researching how to make this concoction!"

During the cooking...

"That is wrong; this one goes in first. That's what we learned in school, so it must be true!"

"Foolishness! A demon's knowledge of this world is peerless and infallible. Make the potion as I myself tell you and you'll not go wrong... You, Problem Woman, what did you mix in there?"

"Stay out of my way, you disgusting demon. I just added a bit of special Axis-brand Aqua water. That'll power this potion right up!"

"Why, oh why must you always do the most absurd things?! And what if you should happen to touch the potion when it's finished and turn it into water? All our work would be for naught! Begone from

here, Plague Bringer!”

“Listen, everyone, I’m the one who runs the magic-item shop, and I’m sure my recipe is correct! It’s all right! Everything’s fine! Just do exactly as I say...!”

I opened the door of the orphanage.

“I don’t care whose recipe you follow, just finish the damn potion already!”

And then I slammed it shut again.

Epilogue

This Way Forever

There was a flash of magical light at the lake near Axel.

“Exploosion!”

The blinding flash was accompanied by a deafening roar. Some of the water turned to steam, producing a rainbow over the lake.

“Wow...”

Sylphina was suitably impressed. Darkness smiled broadly at her and patted her on the head.

“And how many points was that?” Megumin asked from the ground beside me.

“I felt this explosion wasn’t quite as powerful as some, but may I assume you deliberately restrained its full force because Sylphina is still recuperating from her illness?”

“That’s correct. A true master of explosion magic has full control over its overwhelming destructive power. And it only makes sense to take the audience into account when there is one.”

“Well, in light of your obvious love for explosion magic and your respectful consideration of your audience... I rate today’s explosion one hundred points!”

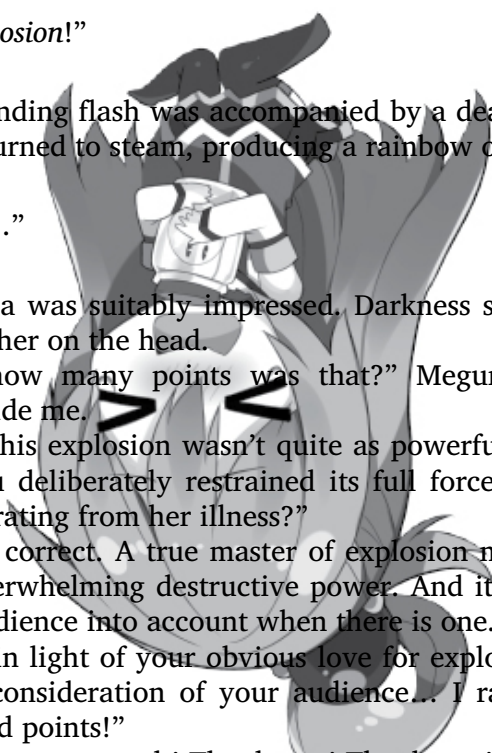
“Thank you so much! Thank you! Thank you!”

Darkness watched with a dubious expression as Megumin thanked me from the ground. “Kazuma, do the two of you spend all your time together being this ridiculous?”

“Oh, Darkness, what’s ridiculous? You sound just like Aqua.”

Megumin, unable to endure this, said, “He is right, Darkness, and though Darkness you may be, if you continue these insults, I shall show no mercy!”

“Okay, very well. Megumin, I accept your challenge. Come at me,



whenever you're ready."

"Hold on, Darkness. That's unfair—just look at me! Stop this! Ahhhh, no, stop, I can see your underwear! Stop flipping your skirt up! I will start calling you Perviness like Kazuma does...! Fine, I give, I submit! Stop it already! Kazuma, hurry up and give me back some magic with Drain Touch!"

Darkness appeared satisfied with her victory over the paralyzed Megumin. "Speaking of Aqua, what is she doing out there?"

"Oh, she learned that the shock wave from Explosion makes it easy to catch the fish. She's been collecting everything that floats to the surface when we do this."

"I must say, this is not ideal for me. Because of Aqua, it seems this has become my only Explosion spot..."

We decided we'd start getting ready for lunch while Aqua got the fish out of the lake. Sandwiches were on the menu for today. Darkness and Sylphina were jealous when they'd learned about how Aqua, Megumin, and I had come here for a picnic, so we'd brought another lunch...

"Look, everyone! Look at this haul! We've got so many! I might even save one for that nasty black fur ball back home."

"She seems to have grown a lot pickier lately. She will not eat raw fish and refuses anything that isn't flavorful enough. Then there's the way she tries to follow me into the bath and the way she extends her claws when she sees your laundry, Aqua. I don't know what's gotten into her..."

"Hey, hold on—what was that about my laundry? Why does that cat only have it out for me?"

Megumin, with the help of some of my MP, pattered about, preparing a skewered fish for each of us, while I used Kindle to start a fire with the wood Darkness had collected. Sylphina watched us work, eyeing the fish with the excitement of a kid on a camping trip.

"I'm the one who went into the water and got the fish, so I'll take the biggest one," Aqua said.

"One moment, Aqua. It may have been you who gathered them, but it was I who finished them off in the first place. Therefore, the biggest one goes to the most important member of this party, namely me."

"Um, I'd be happy to share half my fish with someone... I don't eat that much..."

"No, Sylphina, sweetie, you keep it. Kids have to eat lots and lots. Otherwise, they'll end up like Megumin, permanently stunted due to malnutrition."

"Oh, now you've gone too far! Perhaps you wish to settle the issue of who gets the biggest fish with a contest of strength! Very well, I

accept! Come at me, whenever you're ready!"

I lounged under a nearby tree, watching what amounted to a schoolyard argument, and entertained the idea of a nap until lunch was ready. But then Darkness, looking amused by the banter, sat down beside me...

"Thanks," she said, avoiding meeting my eyes as she spoke. "All my talk about how I would protect you, and you were the one who ended up rescuing me. Again." Her words could have sounded bitter, but her tone was faintly amused.

"Yeah, this time and every other time to come. The way things have been going, I suppose I have to accept that I'm your babysitter. I guess we did help those kids, though. That's all I care about. Plus, I got to do something adventurer-ish for the first time in forever." I rested my head against my arms with my eyes closed.

"...I feel compelled to ask, but so I know for sure, you aren't a loli-lover, are you?"

"Ohhh, you'll pay for that! If you're still curious, maybe I should use *your* body to prove I'm not into little kids!" Before I knew what I was doing, I'd jumped to my feet, but Darkness just giggled quietly.

"I know you don't have the guts."

Jerk.

"There's a perfectly good reason I've never gone that far. I have—No, in fact, every male adventurer in this town has a powerful ally."

Yes, all I had to do was go to those sweet young ladies...

"Hmm. Maybe you'll tell me about them sometime. And where you really come from and why. Maybe you could mention Chris's true identity while you're at it."

She glanced away from me again, back at the others...

"Huh?! You were awake when Chris was talking about her true identity and stuff?!"

"Of course I was. I have the highest defense and HP in this entire town. How long did you think I would be out for? I'll have to give Chris a nice, long lecture when I have the chance..." She still wouldn't look at me, but she laughed, at least. "...*Sigh*. I guess I'm more in love with you than I realized." She sounded completely convinced and smiled wanly.

S-stop that—you'll make me cry again...

"Y-yeah, well, y'know, Megumin and I—"

"Yeah, I know," she interrupted. "I'm older than you and a noble, to boot. I know better than to try to steal you away or tear our friendship apart. I don't want that, either. But..." She ran a hand through her hair, then suddenly leaned close where I was lounging again. "Maybe I could be permitted this little tease?"

"H-hey, you...!"

Not once but twice...?!

She was so darn satisfied with herself, and I was feeling taken advantage of and wanted to get her back a little bit. So I said, "You need to learn how to pick your moment. For starters, just look behind you."

"...?" Darkness turned around and froze. Standing there with a grilled fish she'd been bringing over to Darkness, Sylphina stared with wide eyes...

"M-Mama...! I-I'm sorry, I..."

"W-wait, Sylphina! This isn't—!"

Beside her, holding a fish I presumed was for me, was Megumin, her eyes glowing crimson. "Your feelings, you are free to express, but I said nothing about a secret affair! The nerve, asking someone to look after *your* child as a distraction! You are the most perverse woman...!"

"B-but...! But...!!" Darkness, as unable to follow through as ever, was on the verge of tears.

"I've gotta tell everyone... Gotta let them know all about how Darkness threw herself at Kazuma...!"

"Wrong, wrong, wrong! Or...well, not wrong exactly, but—! Arrrgh! Wait, Aqua, don't go anywhere!"

Aqua set off toward town at a mad dash, Darkness close behind her. Watching them go, I couldn't help feeling a little flicker of a wish in my heart.

"This is kinda nice, like being the MC of a harem story. Things haven't always been easy, but I guess I really do have pretty good Luck."

"This man—!"

I even found myself wishing we could all be this way together forever...



Afterword

Thank you so much for buying Volume 12 of *Konosuba*.

I've started cooking recently: simple things like curry, stew, rice gruel—my repertoire is growing every day. I know what you're thinking: *But those are all just variations on boiling things!* You'd be amazed how far one good pot will get you. I recommend carrying a decent pot with you at all times, just in case you're ever suddenly transported to another world.

Anyhow, here we have a “Darkness volume.” It might seem like a pretty straightforward romantic comedy, but actually, I'd like to do an entire romantic-comedy series, so things probably won't get any rom-commier than this around here.

Then again, I seem to remember saying something similar before, so please don't hold your breath.

Aqua's been sort of shuffled to the side recently, but I plan to bring her back in a big way soon, too.

And once Aqua takes center stage, that's when the real story starts. Not to say she's some kind of heroine or anything. I'm thinking I'll have plenty of time after this volume comes out, so I want to get the last stretch of the story straight in my head.

The TV anime may be over for now, but we still have the video game and lots of other great *Konosuba* stuff, so I hope you'll check it out!

Once again, for this volume I'd like to thank Kurone Mishima-sensei first of all, along with my editor, S-san, and everyone else who helped get this book safely out the door. This one really went right down to the absolute wire, meaning I have to apologize even more profusely than usual for all the trouble I've caused. Sorry, sorry...!

We're all the way up to Volume 12 already, but I think I'll be continuing to cause trouble for a while yet, so sorry in advance to all those people I'm going to bother.

Also, many thanks to everyone involved with this book. And especially, my deepest gratitude to all my readers for picking this up!



AFTERWORD

Darkness was at her absolute girliest
this volume, wasn't she? She sure knows
how to tug at your heartstrings!
Don't give up, Lalatina!!

NEXT



I can't believe you, Darkness!
Doing *that* right in front
of everyone.



Wait! That was just...
I got carried away...!



Carried away, indeed!
And in front of a child,
no less!



N-n-no, I didn't! Well, I did, but it wasn't...!



**Let's remember,
I'm the victim here.**

Wh-wh-why, you...!



Huh? Hey, Kazuma, does the
town look a little funny to you?

Sure. It always does.
Huh, Wiz sure seems freaked
out about something...



Lady Aqua,
you have to help us!

**COMING
SOON!!**



**KONOSUBA:
GOD'S BLESSING
ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD 13**

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